

First author Rasmus Rasch

2020-10-08

Contributions by the amazing github and open source community

Feel free to contribute! Thank you!

The Birch People

Prologue

A single leaf moving with a light breeze sitting lonely on a seemingly dead dark brownish branch in the autumn cold. The white and black tiger patterns of the leg of the birchman was covered in a light damp, that only made the yellow, green and red colours on the leaves branching from the creature stand out even more. It was moving it's long legs, swinging along like giant thick birch stilts. The creature was not alone. They were lots, lots and lots. And they were many.

They were not seen. but they were there. The birch people were three meters tall yet their body figures were like that of large men. Although the creatures did not show any forms of gender but merely a blank expression on their wooden faces. They looked more like grand deities than anything else. The mere sight of one would fill you with a feeling of being small and powerless. These creatures were not deities of death nor were they creatures of life. They were just creatures. The Birch peoples eyes were red crystals that would shine a spectrum of colours in each direction, a view that would leave anyone gobsmacked.

In the cold autumn night, in the dark, they were standing almost in a perfect straight angle, Looking out towards what for them would be the unknown. The colours were a mix of red, yellow, green and red. beautiful autumn colours which were in contrast to the dark night. The slow moving hoard of the birch people left a sound of twigs and branches breaking as they were moving forward in unison. The creatures were there and they were very much alive.

They saw the moving lights of car headlights moving left and right. behind the trees. As the birch people moved closer they noticed a fence. The fence was made from steel wire and two meter long wood poles dug into the ground, clearly made for wildlife. The square holes in the fence were large. One of the birch people moved closer to the fence and lifted up its long arm. It grabbed the fence with it's large birch hands and with an incredible force pulled the metal wire down until it started breaking. One by one the metal strings in the fence started breaking down and snapping off like a when someone removes a spiderweb. The force made by a single birch person was immense and worthy of worship. The metal fence was not an obstacle for the hoard of birch people moving on to the Swedish highway. the first birch person was visible from the highway. It was moving forward and moving toward the ditch before the upward stilt.

The first car that stopped was the start. It was seemingly a symbol for humanity's reaction toward the creatures. A complete stop of everything that would one make sense and perhaps a grounds for a new beginning. After the first car a queue of cars started building up out on the E4. The highway itself was small and it only had one lane on the side facing the birch people and two lanes on the other side. Cars on the other were stopping besides some cars that were slightly too shocked to stop and drove past the queue of cars. Eventually so many cars had stopped on both lanes that it was impossible to move forward in any direction. People were starting to move out of their cars. The hoard of birch people were moving towards the E4. They were many. There were all kinds of people on the E4. Men, women, children of all ages, races and personalities. Most of them were driving home from work, others were just there for other reasons, perhaps visiting friends in the nearby town or perhaps they were moving across the country. Each and everyone had their own reasons for being there. The hoard of people were nervous and anxious yet filled with a feeling of curiosity and awe. There was the noise of murmuring from the crowd.

The opposite, the hoard, the birch people were not gasping or making any other noise. They were simply there and they were simply alive. However there was a feeling of sadness in them as they saw these smaller creatures. A man from the first car had gotten out and was now trying to approach the first birch person that was closer than ever. The man had never felt smaller in his life as he looked into the eyes of this massive creature with red crystal eyes and made from birch. He moved up his hand as if he wanted to poke the creature just to see that it was real yet as he held his hand up it was as if his arm weighed a thousand pound and he could not move and closer. The birch person seemingly just as curious stretched out it's large hand. As the two creatures touched each other's hands the birch person started crying. As if seeing every pain and every struggle the man had ever had.

Chapter 1

Sitting in a car They were driving home from work after a long day. The young couple both worked in the Swedish town Piteå and they were driving home to their house in Skellefteå. The man was in his later twenties and the women were in her early twenties. Stefan worked as a programmer, he would mainly help with automating returns and other similarly boring processes and his beautiful girlfriend who was sitting in the next seat worked as a store clerk for a second hand store. A job she very much loved. She had autism and a slight head injury related from a to early birth which made life harder for her than most others, yet her uniqueness also gave her a special edge in a place where everyone wants to be the same as everyone else. Her name was Sofia. As they were sitting in the car Stefan could not help but notice the incoming autumn weather since the trees had been starting to take on such strong colour pattern, Red, yellow, green and brown. He was also dreading the upcoming winter. He was worried about how the prices for resources would go up during winter, he was also worried that he might not be able to make enough money by the end of the month to purchase a new snow thrower before the snow started coming in.

The Swedish government a few years prior decided to start a new sustainable social experiment. Instead of people trading all kinds of goods and services for one type of currency the country divided up it's currencies in different types of currencies depending on what you were trading with it. There was a currency called MSEK where the currency would only be used to trade food with other food and TSEK was only allowed to be used to trade services for services. There was also a currency called RSEK which was only allowed to be used for trading Resources. Stefan had a lot of service points seeing as how he worked in Systems development yet his girlfriend who was sitting next to him had a lot of resource points since the second hand shop dealt mainly with resources.

The system was very controversial since it required everyone to change however the Swedish people were surprisingly calm and resilient to the change despite all the challenges that it meant for them.

In the car there was the noise of the radio playing. Looking out onto the dark sky and the wet road Stefan could not help but to feel relief, the dark had been soothing for his eyes that worked every day and every night in front of a computer screen. Sofia could not relate, she was more worried about driving during the winter. The steering wheel felt nice on Stefans touch and he would go even deeper into his own thoughts. The young couple had recently bought a new house although the house did need a lot of fixing up. The good thing with it is that there was lots of space especially if they were going to make their own food so that they could trade in and get more MSEK.

The idea for a multiple currency system was that society needed to change its priorities. Even though the system was far from perfect the problem with the old system is that it never actually properly measured what truly was important. The old system meant that people would get richer by doing things that actually did not benefit people. They would work their entire lives on cooking tacos and making specially designed clocks or t-shirts. There was more money in creating a company that cooked hamburgers than a company that would do biological research. It wasn't sustainable and it was a huge misuse of resources. The small government of Sweden had to create special kinds of services to deal with international trade where the old money was translated to the multiple currency system.

Stefan and Sofia had a difficult time at first with this new system however because Sofia had a lot of RSEK, they were able to buy a lot of UV-grow lights and everything else they needed to create a constant supply of food to trade in for MSEK. They also had chickens and little pigs. Mushrooms were the easiest to grow since all they needed was soil and nutrients. They managed to set up a couple of miniature wind turbines so that they would always have a constant supply of electricity.

Stefan always had something to think about, Whether or not it was on his programming, the house, his girlfriend or something abstract like existence and what it meant to be alive. As they both were sitting in their car, lost in thought and listening to music, Sofia saw something and she started screaming at Stefan, as they now both saw what it was Stefan slammed the break.

On the news that day the reporter would read out the news about the usual stuff, some political scandal about how some schools in small villages were shutting down followed by a story about how there was a staff shortage at all Swedish hospitals across the country. This was of course the most common news, yet that wasn't the reason people were tuning in today. The arrival of the birch people was the only reason people tuned in. There were interviews with experts on what they even were, a biologist professor was explaining how it was seemingly impossible for these creatures to have come from natural selection. The amount of birch people that had appeared from seemingly nowhere had made all the experts question where these creatures came from, it seemed impossible that they were dropped off by some mystical creature and it was improbable that they had been there all along. The religious debate had stayed restrained on the public level but people in different religious groups had started to ask questions and they had also decided to make up their own answers, even though they were just theories at this point.

The way too young reporter was reading the news as if reading a teleprompter. "The birch people were named after their similar appearance to birch trees, something which the Chief executive officer of Unity Biotech corporation noted when performing the first initial observations of the creatures. The birch people have been contained yet this is being critiqued by experts across the country. The critiquers are claiming that the government's use of private corporations to handle this issue is bypassing the ethical guidelines set up by various institutions. The news reporter kept on reading the most interesting story of the day and each time the news anchor would have to switch topics the enthusiasm disappeared from the reporters face. "International relations between Turkey and Iceland has been shaken by the news of high ranking politicians having unofficial trade meetings without proper authority to do so, the meeting was recorded by an undercover journalist..."

Tova woke up on her couch. The room was dark with nothing but the light from the large tv that was in the corner. The three piece window on the side was pitch black with blue outlining where you could distinguish the sky from the neighbouring building. From her couch she could see straight into the kitchen which wasn't as much of a kitchen as it was a room

where one person could cook. From her couch you could pretty much see everything in her apartment. Her bookcases are filled with all kinds of books, everything from cell signalling, bioinformatics, cell biology to fantasy, sci-fi and horror books. One of her favorite books was *Hyperion* by Dan Simmons, a book she saw as her personal mantra. The room was half tidy and the other part was cluttered beyond comparison.

Tova had a crushing headache when she woke up, perhaps she needed to drink some water she thought to herself. She pressed off the television and reset her alarm. The news of the birch people had left her feeling like her entire life work had been a pile of redundancy. How was this even possible. All of her hard work, why didn't she just go into finance or law, something which would have been so much easier for her to learn yet twice the pay. The thought she was doing something important is what drove her forwards, she just seemed that it was unfair that she dedicated her entire life to do something that humans haven't been able to do for 40 000 thousand years or so and she still would earn less TSEK than say driving a truck or starting a hamburger restaurant. This wasn't the first time she had felt jealous. She had hoped that when the new currency system would be sprung into place that the government would also have made a special currency for knowledge, a KSEK. Where you would gain knowledge for trading knowledge, The government hadn't bothered to come up with a system for that, they had simply used a combination of RSEK and TSEK. RSEK being used for buying the books themselves and TSEK for paying the teachers and professors. Tova always thought that people had a wrong view when it came to knowledge. Knowledge was in her mind a product, something that had actual worth, not something you just get for free, something worth spending money on.

She laid back down on her couch and took a deep breath of air. This day has been too much. Everything she thought she knew was nothing compared to the appearance of the birch people. She had her own business but she had lost her major role in the company long ago. She had sold off most of her stock and now mainly worked with Sequencing samples and doing small studies for universities. The apartment was more of a workstation than an actual home, there were cheap plastic white boards on the walls covered in post-it notes. There was a computer built loosely without a case, it was spread out on the black glass table with three screens, on the screens there was a setup of multiple virtual machines with multiple different environments.

The young couple had gotten home after what seemed like an unreal experience. After having spoken to reporters and police they had eventually gone home leaving the creatures just standing there. It was surreal, Stefan had felt like it was too early to leave yet at the same time it had been impossible to stay. He himself had felt that his legs were eventually starting to hurt and Sofia had said that she wanted to go home. Despite having seen these incredible creatures it felt at the same time like things aren't that different. Their house was a traditionally Swedish red and white house from the 1950's almost exactly like the one that Sofia had grown up in. The house was pretty cheap even by the old systems monetary standards. Stefan had not trusted the housing prices but after they had bought the house he had quickly realised that he had perhaps been a little naive. The house needed a lot of work, and even though they were two Stefan was the one who was going to be doing most of the work, something he was okay with because he loved her very much. The work was however a constant stress on his mind. Sofia had trouble communicating her feelings, she often wanted to say one thing but what she said often came out as another. Stefan could often see when she wanted to say one thing but it came out wrong, so he would always say to her clearly. "Sofia, you need to tell me what you're feeling, you're only telling me the last bit of that sentence" where she would follow by a moment of silence before a small "I'm not

angry I'm just sad". Nothing felt sweeter to him than when she would say that she was sorry for being mad. Of course she wasn't the only one. He got mad too, but he became more grumpy when he got mad, and he had made it his mission never to swear towards her no matter how mad he got, actually he would never be disrespectful unless you counted a brash and honest opinion on her furniture choice. Stefan was a calm person and he would tolerate almost anything in the world except when it came to home decoration. He liked gray and white with a lot of glowing fluff. Something something which was the opposite of Sofia's taste for Wolves, native American art and spotted patterns, Yes she loved patterns. Their home was a funny mix of modern design, old furniture and wolves. Their house which was red also had an interesting neat feature. Their backyard was full of miniature wind turbines raised up high, at least 5-6 meters high up in the air. Stefan had bought the miniature wind turbine online, he had used a wooden board to get the wind turbine so high up in the air. Then he used some of his TSEK to get someone to help him install it. He also made sure that he got the output integrated to an API so he could always keep track of how much electricity he was making. The hard work had been worth it.

Chapter 2

Uno opened his eyes and in front of him he saw a pair of uniform guard legs standing in front of him. He looked up and the face of a man about the same age as him.

"You can't be here" the man said, not even pretending like he didn't know what was going on, neither did Uno. He knew he wasn't supposed to be sleeping there. When the entire town shutdown during autumn it could get cold so to get a resemblance of heat he had decided to sleep in the pre-entrance to the bank where all the ATM machines were. Since the pre-entrance was always open it seemed like the perfect and only place he could sleep since the guards had already kicked him out of the bus station. Now that he had been kicked out once again he didn't know where to go. There were certain parts of town he didn't dare to go or he would mostly be killed by someone he had wronged in some way or another. Uno knew he didn't deserve to live nor did he care. The only thing driving him forward was the fear of death and the urge to die. He wasn't skinny yet he had recently lost a lot of weight recently. He wore black work trousers since it meant he could walk around with a knife and the police couldn't stop him, not that it mattered, they would never bother to stop him. It would mean too much work and there was nothing that they could do. He had a small amount of money he had received from the social services but he was planning on using it to buy gasoline for Huffing.

He walked away with a bag of his only possessions. Uno felt that his feet were getting tired as he was moving forwards not sure where to go. He had long hair was getting in the way as he was walking in a slightly dizzy state. He had wondered what had happened to him. The air was cold and he thought to himself that it would all be over if he didn't change his life, at the same time he was thinking about the people he could visit. If there was someone who still wanted to hang out with him. He felt jealous of other people's ability to be social, to have friends. Uno had never felt that he had been able to maintain any real friends, yet at the same time he knew people he could visit but they weren't friends, they were just a means to an end. As he was walking in the direction of the bridge over the train tracks he thought that if he would jump it wouldn't be anything sad. He was absolute garbage, the people he had hurt, the people he had disappointed. At the same time he couldn't get over the pure animal instinct of what to do next to survive. It was cold and he needed somewhere warm to go but he had nothing. He would be able to go live under the bridge if it wasn't so cold. The thought hit him that he might head off the edge of the nearby suburbs. It

was a long way but at least there he could make a shelter and maybe start a fire. At Least he had learned something from growing up in the rural north. He started taking out his phone and scrolled through the list of people who had stopped talking to him. Name after name scrolling by, brief girlfriends and old friends he had a falling out with. He passed the name Linnea. When she picked up she actually sounded kind of happy "Hi" " Hey, how are you?" "I'm good, I was surprised to hear from you after all this time", a brief pause "Yeah sorry I haven't been very social, I haven't really talked to anyone lately", "I honestly thought you were dead, No one has heard a noise from you". Uno felt ashamed, not because he had been ignoring her but rather because he didn't know how to ask her for help tonight. "Well something happened and I don't really want to talk about it but after it happened I've been abit skittish.", "Why?, what happened?" "Oh nothing" he said, "You can't tell me that and then not tell me what happened" she replied sounding like she was getting tired of him, a part of him felt like she cared about him which made him want her attention even more, but the shame of getting beaten by a couple of his drug addicted friends had made him hide it even more. "I honestly don't want to talk about it" "If you don't want to tell me don't tell me" "What are you doing" he said as a way to switch the conversation. "I'm just watching tv, with my mom. We have been glued ever since we heard of the creatures" "What creatures?" "You know the ones" "No?" "You haven't seen the news?" "No, I don't have a TV", "Don't you have internet on your phone?" "Can't afford it". He heard a deep breath of disappointment yet there was a part of him that actually liked to make her worry. There was a comfort in knowing that someone might care enough to be disappointed in him even though to her he was just a drain on her energy. "I can't believe you haven't heard but there was an incident in the E4 where they found these strange things, animals that look just like people" There was a small part in him that wanted to laugh, despite the seriousness in her voice. "What do you mean they looked like people? Like monkeys?" "No, they looked like trees, but like people. they were a lot bigger though" "They looked like trees?" "You really need to get internet for your phone" "Hey, you wouldn't want to do anything?" "Like what?" "I don't know just hang out or something" There was a pause on her end, maybe she was pausing because she was thinking, or perhaps because she wanted him to feel the shame of what he had just asked her. "I wish I could but my mom is home right now, I'm certain you have other people you can hang out with." "No worries, it's okay, I have to go anyways" he said in a way to soothen the pain of rejection. "Talk to you later" "Sure, talk to you later". He didn't know why he had ended the call. He knew that he wanted to keep on talking to her, and he also knew she wanted to continue talking to him. After talking to someone for to long he could feel exhausted and the conversation with Linnea had gotten to a point where the reward of having someone to talk to wasn't high enough to pay for the effort it took to being social. He loathed that part of himself, of course he loathed a lot of parts for himself.

The lights were purple and it gave the range of minigreens and lettuce a close to unreal appearance. Stefan had set up the full spectrum uv-lights ages ago and it wasn't until recently that he actually had started feeling pride of his setup. He still wanted to buy another row of grow lights. Growing mini greens and lettuce was easy however it wasn't worth as much as other more difficult vegetables and fruits. He always had something to do but this time it was different, The unnatural colour of the lettuce and the appearance had made him go deep in his thoughts. How was it possible, that things like that could exist, he started imagining what it meant for information to be alive, if the applications he made could ever start to become real, and question their existence, he started to question if it's ethical to even be alive, for anything to be alive. Reflecting on life he started repeating the thought that

we are responsible for creating the truth we want to see, something he had seen in a youtube video a few years ago. The video had oddly gotten stuck on his mind and had followed him in his mind for a long time. He didn't have the time to finish his thought before Sofia started shouting from the bottom floor. He only heard a noise, yet he couldn't make out what she was saying, he rushed closer to the stair case and he shouted "What!", he heard that she responded again but he still couldn't hear what she said. "What is it, you need to speak more clearly!" he said in a calm voice clearly holding back the irritation he felt. "I asked you if you could help me clean" "No I'm doing things with the plants now" "But you promised you were going to help me" "I told you I was going to be harvesting the plants today and after that I'm going to watch tv and you know I haven't been able to watch tv in a super long time" "But you promised me that you were going to help me" "No I haven't. Where are you getting that from?" "Last night you promised me that you were going to help me clean" "No, I said that I promised that I was going to help clean, not that I was going to help you clean today."

The wind was blowing outside and the rain was drizzling off the sealing which was a clear indication that the gutters needed some maintenance. The trees were not moving, only swaying back and forth as the wind gushed them front and back.

The office was small and tidy and made to suit a couple of people. The place looked bigger than it actually was due to the modern design glass walls which made it easy to see through all the offices. If this was a normal office it might have made the employees feel supervised however since all the screens were facing in such a way that no one could look over each other's computers there weren't any workplace issues. The office had much similarities to Tova's own apartment with cheap plastic whiteboards and coloured post-it notes hanging in different parts of the rooms. The major difference was that there was more equipment for her to play with. There were pipettes, CO2 incubators, microscopes and tubes of every kind known to mankind. On the shelves there were books and medicine boxes with chemical agents and reagents that were very unusual. Some of them she had even created herself. The most glorious part of the office was of course the coffee machine. When she came into work she opened the door and turned on the light. She then hung her coat up next to the door and she started heading straight for the coffee machine. The first thing she had to do was to press the rinse button which was a part of the natural maintenance cycle. But it did give her time to pick out her usual cup. It was always the same kind of cup that would pick out no matter all the options. There was no real reason for choosing that cup over any of the other cups but there was just something special about those cups that she liked. After the rinse was done she emptied out the rinse box full of black soup like water. She then put the rinse box back and put her cup in the tray. The typical coffee machine noise meant that the coffee was starting. After she had her brew she headed back into her office and started the screens on her computer. She felt tired and beaten down, not sure what she was going to do or if she really wanted to do it. She wanted to learn more about it. What it meant, the news of these new creatures. She took a sip of her much needed coffee and went into her mail. There was as usual about more than a handful of unread emails, there was one email that caught her eye.

Being involved in the biology community meant spending hours on forums, sites and groups on different websites. Over the years Tova had built up a network of contacts that kept her informed on the most recent news.

The email was from an old friend on one of her old forums, John was always giving advice to his colleagues and Tova was the perfect person to accept this kind of mission. The email had a link to an application form to accept an offer from the Unity Biotech corporation. The

offer was an order on a longer contract for constant stream of cell line preparation. The specifications for the order fit Tova's profile of expertise, some protocols were new to her however she had enough knowledge to read into the specifics.

Chapter 3

The ceiling was white with small cracks in it, there was a light purple hue shifting in from the other room. Stefan was laying down on the king sized bed with a slight strain in his eyes. His head was spinning as he couldn't stop seeing the creatures. When he stretched out his hand up towards the ceiling it was as if he could almost see them, they were tangible. As he imagined staring into the creatures eyes he could feel a drawing, yet almost like a call shearing through his mind, The purple hue on the ceiling almost melted in to his own imagination. Sofia was moving in the room with only a pair of gray panties, she was holding a pillow and a cup of what looked like it was juice. He felt annoyed the second she went through the door, of course he loved her very much but sometimes he needed some alone time. He tried ignoring her as she was moving back and forth in the room. His imagination of the creatures standing in front of him had him occupied. He didn't know what it was. Some kind of feeling of greater purpose. The creatures knew something. There was a part of him that wanted to go back.

He woke up in the middle of the desert, there was nothing but sand and stone pebbles for miles ahead, the ocean melted into liquid glass and he could feel himself sinking in the sand, until he was about knee deep in the puddle of molten glass when a strange two head cow made from red crystals, it was massive. The creature slowly started to raise from the ocean of glass. Droplets of glass falling from the two headed cow as it was standing up on its four legs. "You are small and I am big" the creature said in a dark voice that resonates almost all the way to the core of his bones. "I wonder if I can break your tiny legs ah ah ah" the creature started laughing slower and slower, the noise started resonating deeper as the creature slowed its laughter more and more. It felt unreal to standing there and not having anything to say. The dream felt real to Stefan but he knew it wasn't, yet he knew that there was nothing he could say to such a large creature he didn't like the idea of just doing nothing. He tried mustering every bit of strength he had in him as and tried yelling back but when he opened his mouth nothing came out.

The creature started running towards him faster and faster and as the creature started closer the creature began shrinking more and more until it was small enough that it shrank into the ocean of liquid glass. He sighed a breath of fresh air and opened his hands. He looked up into the purple sky and started leaning back. the more he leaned the more gravity started taking over until he completely fell backwards. As he fell over the knee deep liquid ocean became like solid and fell through underneath him. The walls of the pit were brief until he popped out on the other side. As he fell up from the hole he was facing the hole he came from but he could feel that he was catching foot hold and he turned with this new force to stand on his feet watching this new landscape. A winter paradise, the aurora borealis lighting up the white snow beneath. The scene was frozen in time. He couldn't feel his skin stinging like he usually would, it felt more like the first warm breeze during spring, like swimming in soft ice cream.

There were silhouettes of people rising from the snow as the snow blanket would wave up and down. As the silhouettes rose they started shrinking as quickly as they came. with mere body expressions that looked like agony.

He woke up not sure what the time was. He turned over and saw Sofia with only a sheet over her, he could see the lines of her fine figure. She was petite and very attractive

however Stefan had started taking her fine figure for granted. "Are you asleep?" "No, I've been awake for a while. what time is it?" "I don't know, check your phone", "No you check our phone", He smiled at her and she smiled back "No you check your phone" he said with a grin. "Ugh, men" she said as she started getting up on the bed, she ran off to the book self nearby where her phone had been. Stefan closed his eyes and thought more about the dream he just had, after awhile he let out a "what time is it" and laughed for himself. "it's 11". It was a saturday so they didn't need to go to work. "Do you think they are still there?" she Said. "I think so, to be honest I kind of want to go back" he said "What! You can't be serious, What if you get hurt, you saw the size of those things", "They were calm" , "No you're not going". Whenever Sofia was angry in a sweet way he felt really loved, and at the same time a little scared that she loved him so much. He had previous relationships and after enough breakups he always had in the back of his head the thought that it might end, so when things seemed too good to be true he would emotionally shut off. He thought it was easier to just accept that she wasn't going to let him go. "Okay, don't worry, I was just kidding. Do you want to have eggs for breakfast my sweet", "Yes my sugarplum" "No, You're a sugarplum". They started laughing.

The kitchen was small but newly renovated, The walls were plain gray on the side where all the kitchen items were and light gray patterned on the dining end of the kitchen room. On the top of the kitchen cabinets there were copper pipes that ran from the wall to the area above the fridge, the pipes went into the cabinet above the fridge. The room had a cute aura to it, it wasn't too big. Stefan stood in front of the stove. He put turned on the electric stove and put a pan on it full of water. Sofia was running back and forth and grabbing stuff left and right. "How many eggs do you want?" "Three" , "Okay, so three for you and two for me" "Yeah" she answered in her cute voice. He grabbed five eggs and put them in the boiling water. "I kind of feel like getting sweets from the shop later today" "You read my mind, Can you get me liquorice?", "How many?" he sighed. She looked at him, "eight" "I can buy you four". Her faced turned to pure joy and he gave him a string hug. He started laughing, "Okey take it easy, take it easy" "Your such a good boyfriend, so much better than everyone else" "Haaa Haa, okey honey... Calm down now." He said, sounding embarrassed. He pried her arms away from him, "Oh no I forgot the timer" He said and started rushing toward the fridge. He set it to ten minutes because he knew how she wanted her eggs. He grabbed a pre-cut loaf of bread from the counter and took out five pieces. He took out butter from the fridge. some Shredded Vasterbottens cheese. A Swedish delicacy. When the eggs where done he took them out and cut them up into pieces and made a sandwich from each egg. He sprinkled on a small bit of curry, paprika, garlic and on top he but the cheese. Every time he made something that tasty he felt proud of himself. Sofia compliment after she tasted it only made his ego grow further.

In his car he sat for a bit. He would look out unto all the beautiful autumn colours almost memorized. As he stared into the birch woods he couldn't help to think about these creatures. How did they come into existence? He started the car

He stood on the parking lot with a paperbag full of food and sweets. It had cost slightly more than he expected. He had also gotten Sofias eight liquorices, even though he said he was only going to buy four. He wanted to do it, He felt such a strong urge to go back to that place on the E4 where he first had seen the birch people. There was some kind of morbid curiosity that he couldn't let go off. The feeling was so strong yet he was telling himself that he couldn't. He had promised Sofia but that there was more than a promise, he had felt fear. Stefan wanted to face these creatures again but he was terrified of what might happened. Would they even be there. What would he say to Sofia, he'd could just apologize to her.

The birch people

As he was driving out of the parking lot he was met with a choice. Go left or go right. Go left to his beautiful girlfriend Sofia or go right, and make his way down to the E4, drive for about an hour until he reaches the place where he last had spotted them. He took a Right turn.

Uno was walking on a walk road that had been straight the last two kilometers, it was the main walk road for anyone in the area that needed to walk to the nearest supermarket if they didn't have a car. It had multiple branches and on each branch there were three story apartment complexes. The area was both big and small at the same time. When walking every once in a while the walk road would go underneath the main roads where cars would go.

Uno could feel a stinging sensation in his feet that had come from walking such a long way. He was thinking about the time he had adopted a dog that he named Sammy after the rock artist Sammy Hagar, a reference he had heard but never understood, all he knew was that it had something to do with guitars he thought. At the time he wasn't homeless. He shared an apartment with his roommate who got quite the surprise when he went home and discovered that Uno had gotten a dog for free that day and accepted it without any thought of consequence or consideration for his room mate. Whether or not Uno was good or wasn't as important as whether the dog was good for Uno. As a chain smoking drug addict going outside for walks was a good thing. And for the dog, walking from house to house with his owner wasn't that bad either.

He leaned on the wall of the walk tunnel until his entire back had slouched so much that he was eventually sitting down. His backpack hit the pavement with a loud noise which reflected the fatigue in his body.

As Uno had for the first time in a long while not know what he was going to do next he had nothing else in his mind to do that look at the graffiti on the other side and feel completely helpless and lost. He felt afraid as he had nothing else in his mind but to wonder what he was going to do next. He didn't know if he could call anyone, it seemed as if every one he knew had started to ignore him or just plainly wanted to murder him. Some people he knew he was afraid of spending time with because they knew or were friends with people who he thought might want to kill him.

He was looking through the names of people in his contacts, one by one he would come up with excuses why he couldn't talk to them. Deep down he wished he could call back Linnea but he thought that she probably would get tired of him. He both wanted and needed social interaction yet at the same time he was afraid of it.

He could see in front of him how that little dog had walked with his tongue hanging out on the left side almost like a side facing P smiley. Sammy had been a mix breed with papillon as a main trait. He had gotten huge side muscles from dragging his leech from Unos unnaturally long walks.

The walk tunnel was the last before the road ended with the abrupt change from pavement to forest. It was a great place for Uno to rest since there wasn't any reason for anyone to go there. There might be the occasional dog walker but beyond that there wasn't going to be any joggers.

The pavement was cold and the longer he would sit there and scroll through his phone contacts the more afraid he felt. He looked out into the darkness where the wilderness started. He considered whether or not he could build a bed, maybe out of moss, or perhaps if he could create a straw bed from fir-tree branches. It wouldn't be pleasant but it would

prevent his body heat from dissipating into the ground. he recieved a slight bolt of genius as he realised that he could combine the branches and the moss for comfort.

The new currency system had a strange effect on the community which Uno belonged to, since it was the rule of law that had given the currency system it's efficiency. Most people in Sweden had at first been resistant but laws and legislation had been put in place to prevent people from trading MSEK with RSEK and RSEK with TSEK. The purpose had after all been that MSEK was only supposed to be used for food. The Food currency system made people more charitable with their MSEK since they knew that the money would not go to anything other than food but it also meant that people in a way became poorer and MSEK was relatively expensive. After a while prices went down and as people started growing and producing more variety the MSEK economy grew stronger. At first the drug community had been slow to react to the new currency system which was a surprise to many experts in the police but after some time the community had created a secondary form of economy which had several layers to it. Since there was nothing to uphold the legislation that MSEK, TSEK and RSEK wasn't to be traded with each other in the drug community the systems started dividing. Drug dealers could trade drugs, MSEK, RSEK, sex and TSEK. Sometimes a transaction could be made with favors and loyalty or loans. Being able to trade RSEK for MSEK would become an easy way to make money for someone in that status. The authorities would have a difficult time maintaining control over the currencies in those markets. Uno didn't truly understand the systems, all he knew was that there weren't as many shops selling cool merchandise. It made everything more boring but at the same time it's not that it really mattered to him. He had liked that it was easier helping people since there was an over influxuation of TSEK. He could just ask one of his friends if they needed any help and then he could get TSEKS which he could then use to trade in for drugs.

The wind blew and he could here something from within the woods, something behind the leaves. Perhaps it was something he could catch. he felt a silence as there was a quick halt in the wind and everything became quiet and eerie. He felt a pulse coming from the woods like a wave going through his body. He stood up and started walking towards the bushes that were like a wall to the woods. The late evening had turned the night dark and as he walked closer to the glaring he felt a force pushing him back. There was something. His curiosity to see what was behind the leaves drove him further in. He had too use both his hand to peer the braches, leaves aside so he could enter but he could only see darkness. It enveloped him. He went inside the woods deeper and deeper. Nervously going further inside.

He heard a branch snap, and he quickly realised it was from his own feet. His pulse started racing, yet he couldn't help to see the irony in the situation. Logic told him he had nothing to be afraid of but there was a part of him that could help but to feel watched. A dark cloud dissipated in the sky and the moon started lighting up. He could see the creatures, one by one appearing from the dark. He realised that he was surrounded by these huge giants made from birch. He tried shutting his mouth but it was as if his mind didn't talk to his body. The creatures slowly started turning towards him and the birch person that stood in front of him turned his head to face him, staring deep into his eyes. As the creatures started their natural swaying and adjustment of body position he felt an involuntary panic spread inside him. His heart started pumping so fast he was close to certain that he was going to pass out. Uno fell down on his knees. Uncertain of what to do he clamped his hands together and started crying into the wet moss covered ground. "Naaaahg pleeease, I don't deserve this, I don't want to live", his eyes were swelling with tears and his face became red. "WHY" Why! have I done something, What am I to you! Why would you let something like me exist!". He went from crying to a half laughing, half crying

The birch people

moaning noise. He didn't mean it to the creatures, he meant it to the universe, and to himself and to anything greater than himself. He wanted to be reborn as a child, so he could see every person he ever met, and cry in their arms, his mom and dad, his sisters and brothers. His old friends from school. Every girl he ever had a crush on every all of his childhood pets. He just wanted to cry.

He felt something strong pierce through his shoulder. At first it was more of a stinging feeling followed a warm stinging dripping from his shoulder. And then a shearing pain. Everything became real and he instantly became aware of his surroundings.

The birch person's sharp and strong wooden thumb had pierced through his shoulder like a toothpick through a stake as it had placed its hand on his shoulder. Uno quickly looked up into the eyes of the creature followed by an intense scream. The creature changed its body posture to appear bigger than it looked and quickly leaned in. A dark and powerful roar came from the creature. A scream the sprayed long with droplets of spit. As the first birch person started roaring the hoard in unison took after the first birch person and performed a myriad of roars. Uno could see the world turning black and lost all the strength in his body.

Chapter 4

The most important thing to all life is light, that was the message Tova saw frosted on the side of her glass sculpture she had received from a friend of hers.

She had long wanted the opportunity to do an experiment that involved optogenetics on Gonorrhea virus, She did however need to cultivate the virus in a setting where she could control it. That's where she had the opportunity to create something called chocolate agar for the first time. She knew that blood agar plates were less efficient as Chocolate agar, She also thought it would be fun to try to create it. Chocolate agar is of course not real chocolate, it is the same as blood agar with certain chemicals that transforms the colour to look like chocolate.

Staring at the agar she had a sense of disgust from the contrast in watching something that looked tasty and smelled weird. Knowing what was cultivating in the small transparent petri dishes made her nauseous. The room was outside her main office, that is where they had all their cultures. The glass walls made everything look more futuristic but there was a practical purpose, She could see what was going on everywhere and at all times. It made it helped peak her creativity on the job. The entire office had been specifically set up to spark creativity and productivity. There was flowcharts and writing on some of the glass walls.

After her setup with the chocolate agar she took a photo of it so she could post it on one of her internet groups. Perhaps she would get a response from one of her online friends. The biology community has long been full of social people who like to present their needs and ideas, part of it stemmed from the need to transfer information between biologist, teachers and students. The internet forums had a quite large following of professionals and amateurs. Tova would be considered an amateur due to her only having a company and working in the private sector. Even though she was an amateur she was very entrepreneurial and had a strength in her ability to create new and interesting innovation and groundbreaking research which had the possibility to reduce costs or just generally do a lot of good. The more academic type were not as entrepreneurial however they were at the outmost front end of research and were highly respected by people of Tova's status. It was that sort of hybrid relationship that had made them need the forums.

The photo was commented and discussed by a few of her friends. It really made her happy. These were people she admired that were giving her praise. She admired them

more than celebrities or people who were super wealthy. Mainly because she knew that those kind of things didn't matter. She had watched the face of creation she knew that no matter how rich someone is it isn't going to make them anymore than what they are, but the people she knew were actually changing the face of creation. People who actually had an opportunity to actually cure different cancers that had never before been curable. Whilst learning about senescent cells there was a switch that went off in her mind. Knowing that it was somehow possible to rejuvenate people on a cellular level made her realise how wrong our entire economic system was. The new currency system was better than the old system but it was far from what it was supposed to be, and could possibly be. But the new system had shown that it was possible to change the system. The old system had been around but it had truthfully been obsolete since the agrarian revolution. It had been obsolete since the first tractor was invented.

Tova opened her email to see if she had any unread mails, there was as usual some conference spam, She had gotten a message from the Swedish government regarding a tax errand, It was nothing serious, she just needed to update some information. Moving down the list she found a interesting mail from John. It was an invitation to join an online meeting. She pressed accept with a smile on her face.

Several hours had past, the cell culture had cultivated enough for her to see the lightning of her streaks. she had had a high temperature on her heat mat. It was of course and unusually fast growing culture but she had used her special skills in biology too make the culture evoke even more rapid growth. The vials and bottles in her lab were full of different colours, aluminum foil and transparent agar cultures with leaves in them. There were different lab equipment of all kinds but they were not the unusually expensive kind. As a private entrepreneur she didn't have the same funding as some more academic types.

Her phone called. The number was blocked. "Hi", "Hello my name is Johanna Embers, I'm calling from the Unity BioTech corporation and I'm looking for Tova, is that you?" "Yes, are you calling about the application I sent too you?" There was a pause on the other end of the phone call, as if Johanna had planned out the conversation in her head only to now have the flow interrupted. "Yes... We were very interested in your profile and experience, as you know biologists are in short demand", "Yes there are not a lot of us out there, although I'm not really a biologist" "Yes we saw that you didn't have any traditional education although that is more common with private companies, most people rarely go the straight route. We were still very impressed, perhaps even more impressed" There was a silent pause as Tova didn't know how to respond to such flattery. "The project seemed very interesting, I absolutely know that I am able to help you, I have a lot of practice with preparing, cultivating and shipping cell lines. I am also very flexible with my routines and if you need me to we can adapt after your needs." "That's very good to hear, I was thinking that before we even start this process we would love some references from previous customers and after that we would like to book a new face to face interview so that we can negotiate the terms of our contract". "Yes, I can send you some references, where should I send them". The voice went mute and there was the noise of papers being lifted and moved, Tova imagined that this person lived in a complete mess. "You can send it to [Info@... UnityBioTech.se](mailto:Info@...UnityBioTech.se)", "Yeees... was that with a .se at the end?" "yes, and one more thing, Have you ever worked with plant engineering or agrobacterium?" "A little bit, I might need to brush up on it but I should definitely be able to come up with something". "Good, I will talk to you later on email after you send out your references." "Yes that sounds good, Bye" "Goodbye". Tova hadn't realised how much her heart had been racing, this was a chance to work with the company that are responsible for containing the wooden creatures. Since she had a lot of autonomy at the company she had

the ability to assign new customers and negotiate deals, and if nothing else there was a non spoken understanding that Tova could do pretty much anything as long as it didn't interfere with anyone else's work. Being a shareholder was a big part of it but as an employee for her own partly owned company she had earned herself a strong reputation and she made herself indispensable. She was very good at communicating and she had also made it clear to her coworkers that her strategy for success required how to try different things, to take time to think and also that she had to be allowed to make mistakes even if it meant throwing away several months of work. They accepted it because of her high status.

Tova called the CEO of the company Tony Gretlax.

"Hi Tony, How are You?" "Hi, Yeah I'm good, Working on our projects, are you calling to check up on the vials?" "No I wasn't calling about that but now that you've brought it up, what is going on with my vials?" "Well we called the supplier but they said that they are stopping production since they haven't made any money on those models for years, so the next shipment isn't coming". "There are other suppliers also I have another project that I think is going to take priority". "Has something happened? No one has dropped a petri dish have they?" "Thank god, no, I actually applied to help a company with cell line prep work". "Wait, so why are you taking on something like that, Don't you already have Cell line work to do?" "It was for Unity". "Do you mean like togetherness?" "No... UnityBiotech". "I've heard of them but they're not that special are they?" "They are the ones that are responsible for containing the birch people." "Are you serious?" "yes, They even mentioned agrobacterium work". "They are going to need some references before the official contract negotiation" "I can talk to some of our old customers for you" "Thank you"

The meeting was taking place at the Swedish main office for the UnityBioTech corporation. There was a pleasant feeling in the office, The furniture had been placed in such a way that the room felt like it was bigger than it actually. Tova was fascinated by the pattern of the floor, it showed that the building had recently been renovated, She felt intimidated by the professional feeling of the room. The entire setting made her question where all the money for cancer research had gone, there sure wasn't a lack of luxuries in this office, it felt more like a place to make money than it felt like a place where actual science was made. The door opened and Johanna Ember and a man in a light blue shirt came in.

They shook hands.

"Hi, I'm sorry it took such a time, we had a meeting that ran on too long". "Absolutely no worries, I know how it is in the industry" Truth is Tova was actually a little annoyed at the delay, after all these were just paper pushers who didn't actually do any real work. There was a part of her that knew that the real reason she was so bitter had nothing to do about them and all to do about her.

Sofia had been doing the dishes for a long time, her way of doing the dishes might have been more complex than most people's way of doing the dishes. She would fill up a bowl of water and put all the cutlery to soak before she went on to actually wash them. Even though she didn't enjoy it there was a therapeutic nature to it that she did enjoy. She would think about the day's assignment and what she could do for fun, maybe she would watch some TV or something. She also reflected on how she had behaved earlier that day when they had their argument. She felt bad that she had yelled but she was also annoyed at Stefan. There was a part of her that was afraid of losing him despite him reassuring her that he wouldn't leave her no matter how much they argued. She wasn't as afraid of them leaving each other because they argued but rather the argument itself. It seemed to have gotten so much more

since they first got together, of course this is common for couples but it is also a warning clock.

She wondered why he hadn't been back, it wasn't so long since he left for the shop. She had hoped that he had not gone back to those things. Knowing that those kinds of creatures existed had frightened her. But she knew of course that there were worse things in this world, and she sure knew that was. As a young attractive woman she was used to men behaving like garbage if not worse. Stefan had been the first man who at least behaved a little bit like a man should behave. He took care of her, he never cussed in front of her and he never used profanity in front of her not even to make a joke. Some men would completely change after spending too much time with them alone. At first they could be so nice but then they would change, at there was no particular type of man, it could be any man, and they would themselves never realise that they were doing it. There was a part of her that worried that Stefan would change like most men do but so far he hadn't. She knew of course that it was always a possibility and she had long before set out a line that if he ever crossed it that would be for him. She would instantly leave and never look back. If he would ever treat her with disrespect that would be it for him. There was of course a big difference between being angry and being disrespectful, if he ever were to call her stupid and lazy that wouldn't be okay, of course being a gentleman he had never and he never would. Sometimes she wondered why he was such a gentleman but the truth was that she never cared.

When she saw Stefan slowly stretching her hand out to the creatures she had been in a state of shock. It wasn't until now that she had realised that there was something off with the creatures. Why had they not shown themselves before, and why hadn't they been seen or spotted before? She had tried answering her own questions in different ways. Maybe the creatures were created by some government agency or perhaps been the descendants from an ancient tribe in the woods. It was of course ridiculous however it was more logical than anything else that had come to mind.

She feared he had gone back to those horrible unnatural creatures. She wasn't sure how she would react to him having gone of without her. She had long thought that he had left most of the house work to her. When ever she would confront him on it he would say that he did so much more work than her, he would take out the garbage, he would feed all the animals, cook, grow food, he would build on the house and even though she would book the laundry it often ended up with him being the one doing the laundry. Even though he didn't do the dishes very often every day he would make dinner and he would always clean up the dishes he used for food. It was so much easier for him when he lived on his own, He only had a minimal set of plates and cutlery so dishes never piled on top of each other and whenever he needed to clean he could easily do so. Now that he had moved in with Sofia that was no longer the case. She had loads of plates and cutlery, and since they didn't have a washing machine the dishes would just pile on and on.

Working at a second hand shop had been absolutely great for Sofia, she absolutely loved her co-workers who were really supportive. Her Autism made it difficult to find support especially at work places, Sometimes things would come out in other ways than perhaps she had meant it and that would make misunderstandings frequent. She had been fired from her last job because her boss had finally had enough.

The second hand shop paid her in RSEK which was something they had a lot of since the law only allowed them to charge money in that currency. It made it difficult for them to donate money to charity but the government had arranged so that charity organisations

could have the Currency and all other currencies traded into Euro so that it could be sent to poorer countries.

Sofia liked getting paid in RSEK since she always felt that she would get a small rush when she bought something. There was something enegising about ordering that thing she would have dreamed about for the last week or so.

Stefan was sitting in a room with a security guard next to him. The room was furnished with a large oval table and bookshelves without any books on it. It was clear to Stefan that the people working for the company weren't allowed a lot of personal freedom with the company accounts. The company Stefan worked at allowed the employees a small budget to buy stuff for their own wellbeing and productivity, perhaps an office plan, a whitechart and books on software development so that they could improve themselves and get. This room gave off a sense that no one in this company had that. The security guard was a middle aged man who was round around the stomach. He looked big but he didn't look veryfit, Stefan knew that if he would have wanted to he could easily run away or something but he remembered that the man was just doing his job, he also didn't want to make the situation worse for himself.

"Sorry that this is taking such a long time but my boss is in a meeting right now." "It's no worries, I just don't want to be in any trouble" "You don't need worry about that, we couldn't even arrest you if we wanted to. Although since you went past the lines they probably just want to ask you some questions" "That's good to hear, Am I the only one?" "No we had some reporters and some younger people that tried to sneak and look at the creatures... And I don't blame them for trying, I mean who wouldn't want to get a look at three meter tall tree people" "They are quite interesting, I was the first person to see one I even touched the creatures fingers." "Wait, that was you! That's absolutely amazing. I can't believe they dared come that close to you" "Why wouldn't they?" "Well since they were contained they haven't actually gone close to anyone. We drove them back into the woods and drew up some fencing stronger fencing than that wildlife fence." "Do you know how many they were?" "I can't say to be honest, We haven't counted them all, especially since they have been appearing in more than just one place" "You're telling me that they have shown up in more places?" "You haven't been watching the news, have you?" "not really no, why whats going on?" "Well they've been showing up at four more sites now" Stefan didn't know how what the guard was telling him could be happening. If he hadn't seen the creatures himself he wouldn't have believed it had ever happened the first time but for it to have happened more than once meant that there was something making these creatures show up, It couldn't have been natural.

The situation was highly unusual for Stefan, Being a Programmer he was used to a well worked out rutine. He would wake up, first he would go to the bathroom followed by him taking his medication. If he Sofia stayed home he would go straight for the door however if she had to go to work his next step would be to nagg her to come out of bed and get to wwork. After a fair bit of nagging eventually she would have made it out of bed. It would take her about half an hour to get ready which was incredibly infuriating for him but he never said it. Once they would both be in the car they would head straight to work. after an hours drive he would be the first to get out of the car and she would then drive another 10 minutes to the second hand shop. When Stefan got inside the office he would work for a straight eight hours and then Sofia would come and pick him up followed by them driving an hour back, He would then cook dinner. Everyday, day after day, week after week. Stefan hated his job. It wasn't due to him having disliking anyone at his job he simply did not like the work

The birch people

environment of being a programmer, stress was too high and he would always feel like he didn't know enough combined with being underpaid for the work he was doing.

Chapter 5

Johanna Embers was a stunning blonde woman in her best years. She looked like someone who took great pride in their appearance. Her face was very symmetrical and had very symmetrical features. When Tova talked to her she could not help but noticing that Johanna stared her in her eyes while they talked, not too much but unusually enough for the people Tova was used to talking too. The man with the blue shirt reminded Tova of her brother. He was easy to read unlike Johanna. "Yea so as I was saying on the phone we need someone who can take on a longer contract of three years with the possibility to extend" "Yes we would be very interested, of course we have standard rules for who is responsible for certain liabilities if something changes in the requirements" "Yes, that is something that we are used too, I'm assuming it wouldn't cost anything more than the salary plus your standard fees", Johanna said. Tova felt jealous of the women yet at the same time intimidated "Another thing we should mention is that our organization is divided into what is basically a mother company that is then under the payroll of a shell corporation" "I'm sorry what do you mean?" Johanna bore a slight face of shock, more at the fact that the sloppy woman in front of her had such a legally complex company that she herself barely understood it "We have a structure where we have a mother company that basically owns the personnel, the equipment and all the patents, the money however comes in through the shell company, so you would basically pay the shell company and they would hire the mother company." "Why do you do that then? because if there is any tax fraud involved we strictly follow the law." "Absolutely no tax fraud, the reason we do it is because if we have a study that for some reason or other would fail we can still keep the equipment, the staff and the patents. This is actually something investors like because it drives down starting cost." "That's a very interesting structure, that way you could go bankrupt how often you'd like, but why should we sign a contract if there is nothing that guarantees that the mother company won't just take the money and not produce any results" "Well, that's why we usually implement a pay as you go model, we also have strong contracts and deals in between the companies, which you will of course get copies of, these are integrated in the offer." "There is one thing that we would need incorporated in the deal of course" Tova felt a more serious feeling coming from the face of the woman. "The terms of secrecy, Since the inner working of this is highly sensitive we have a much stronger secrecy agreement than most. Are you willing to accept this deal?"

Tova had early in her youth absorbed a sense of risk deduction. Her father who was the bigger part of her life had gone bankrupt after his company went bankrupt. This is something that had shaped her entire early teenage years. She went from living an expensive life too worrying about the collectors coming when she was at school to empty the house. Even though they were not legally allowed to take her stuff only her father's things, if she wasn't at home there was no way that they could be able to separate what was her father's and what was hers. This was a big concern in her life, it also imprinted a feeling of uselessness. It wasn't until she was older that the feeling went away. There were good things about the experience though, she had always been very risk weary. She received money, she thought it was so stupid, and now that there was a completely different economy it only made everything seem so much more stupid. Lending had changed with the new economy, if someone would loan for a business they would need to state how much they would use for MSEK and how much

they would use for RSEK, TSEK was differently calculated all together. It made making a business more complex but it also meant that employers had to make food so that they could pay their employees in SEK as well. Tova would of course never loan to start a business unless she knew that there was a guaranteed contract to ensure that the risk was reduced. For a researcher she was surprisingly good at risk reduction.

Johanna asked again "Are you will to except the deal?". "Yes" Tova wasn't sure what she had just accepted, this was of course in official until the actual signing gets done but it meant that the paperwork is ready to be sent to her lawyers for review and finally signing.

Uno opened his eyes, he could see a room with blue and white walls, it looked very clean and neat, on his left there was a machine that was beeping, it looked really old, almost like in a 80s space movie. In front of him he could see a grand room with a bigger desk with an older nurse behind it. There were younger woman running around, i blue shirts and blue pants, they looked so sweet. There was something that made him feel happy about seeing women closer to his own age, It gave him hope that there were maybe a chance for him afterall. Hee had a crushing head ache and a dry mouth. He was in a bed with the handlebars put up. He didn't realise how fatigued he was until he started sitting up. on his right there was a table with his items. it wasn't a lot, just the things he had in hiss pockets at the time and a his old clothes. It dawned on him that he was wearing new clothes, that meant that someone had undressed him and switched his clothes. It must have been one of the nurses. He felt a shame knowing that one of the nurses might have seen him naked, he wasn't proud about any part of himself.

On pure instinct he removed the needle in his arm which he had just started to notice. He took off the thing that was clamping on his finger and a horrible noise started coming from the machine. A beautiful nurse came running and harshly put the thing back on his finger "You can't that off". She was absolutely beautiful, he was hypnotized by the young woman. She was in a way hypnotized by him, not in admiration but rather in curiosity, how she would interact with some as unstable. "Where am I? What happened?" "You were found in the woods passed out after they contained the last group of birch people".

He started realising what had happened, he had been chosen, There was something that they wanted to say to him, he had a message he needed to tell.

"Did you see them?" the young nurse said. ""Yes- yes I did, I stood in the middle of all of them, They blessed me, they let me live." He was talking fast and the nurse felt uncomfortable. "That must be an amazing thing too see, do you know how you passed out?" "No, yes, sort off, I remember somethings" "Well You are going to need to wait here until the police come to ask you some questions, You can't leave either until we can be sure that you don't have concussion". The nurse left in a hurry. She was clearly busy with other things. There was a part of him that wanted run off with the beautiful nurse, he of course knew this was just fantasy. Beside he had a new purpose.

Siting still to wait for the police wasn't something that felt natural to him, he couldn't stop himself from feeling like he needed to leave. He didn't know what it was but for some reason he felt out of place, even though the bed was the nicest thing he had felt in a long time. He tried getting out of the bed but the handlebars were stuck. He started to lift his legs and kind of fling himself out of the bed. When he got over he was surprised at how high up from the ground he was, he hadn't realised that the nurse had lifted the bed.

He removed the clamp connected to his finger which made thee machine start making a horrible noise again. The alarm had set off an instant reaction from the nurses. Most were already busy with their assigned patients. The nourse that Uno had talked to put down the

patient journal for the patient she was currently with to rush over to Unos machine, she tried putting it on him again but he refused to put it on. "No, I'm leaving and you can't stop me" "Will you at least wait long enough for us to get you some shoes" Sure, I'll wait, As soon as the nurse left he ran toward the hallway, He knew a lie when he saw it, he was used to lying all the time. Uno knew that the nurse was planning on getting the security guards.

The door to the hallway wasn't locked which surprised him, But he assumed that it was only due to it only being used by the nurses themselves. The hall was thin and the walls were covered with painted fiberglass. It was used all over Sweden's different government owned buildings. The hallways lead down to a second door with frosted glass. It had a green extra handle and a sign above it. he yanked on the green handle but it did nothing. He had to hold to small lock handle above the green handle at the same in order for it to open. There was a rush of adrenaline going through him. His heart rate was at maximum speed and he wondered what would happen when the security guards caught up to him. When he opened the door he was met by an empty massive hallway. The ceiling was at least eight floors above him and made from glass. He ran to the end of the hall where there was an emergency escape door. He opened it and was met by the dark and cold streets of the outside world.

Stefan had started to feel restless sitting inside the room until he could hear the noise of foot steps approaching the door. The woman who came out from the door was an incredibly beautiful woman. He had at first been prepared for anything to come out of that door except someone so mesmerizing. There was something about her that reminded him of his granddaughter, He could imagine that her father must be proud. If he had a young daughter he would want her to be beautiful but more importantly to feel like she was. The only thing he would fear would be if she didn't like reading books.

He smiled at Johanna. "Do you like reading books?" "Yes I do actually, sorry I'm late, I had another meeting" "I know how things can be at these kinds of companies, I work for one" "Stefan, what were you doing behind the perimeter?" "I had to go back, and meet them again?" "What do you mean by 'meeting them again'" "I was the first to meet them. I even touched one, it was just yesterday, by the way your company has worked very fast" "That's why they hired us. It isn't the only place they have showed up""yes, you security guard told me" "Stefan is there any reason why you came back?" "I don't know why but I had this strange dream, it was as if something was talking to me in my dreams, I'm not sure what it was but I just feel like I need to see one again" Johanna took a deep breath and sighed. There was a moment of silence.

Uffe looked more like a security guard, just like the occupation itself, it looked more interesting that it actually was, Mainly just routine inspection and showing his presence to scare off anyone who thought about vandalising, Uffe was old now and had started to get the figure of a trucker, by far not someone whose job was to protect people. Truth is security guards were not actually meant to protect anything, They were mainly there for security purposes. Uffe loved his job but he never thought that it would be what he would end up doing. He always thought he would end up working with something less physical. The day that he started working for Unity biotech he felt super important, running around all those smart people with their different liquids, he had no idea what it was. He felt very proud protecting the assets of Unity, he felt almost as if he did more work than the scientist themselves.

"Uffe can you please show Stefan to the creatures" ""Yes of course, but are you sure you want me too?" "Yes, Stefan, if we got you close to a birch person, do you think you could

The birch people

help us get a swab sample, Since they seemed to be interested in you, we might actually be able to get close to thing” She looked at Stefan “I can try to help but I’m not sure how I would do that, what is a swab?” “A Swab is just what we call when we use a cotton swab to get a bacterial sample, or whatever might be growing on those things ” “I would very much like to try it, is there any chance you have someone who could help teach me how to do a swab?” “Yes we have many resources for that. we will have it all set up for you”.

There was fog that had arisen from the ground, the red, yellow and green leaves made a perfect contrast to the strict green of the summer months. The ground was wet and brown from a mixture of dirt, dead leaves and mud. There were tracks that went deep on the ground, clearly from something large. The creatures were large, and had an arrogant posture with their hips leaning slightly out and their arms hanging down. They didn’t move besides readjusting their stances. One of the birch people accidentally bumped into another birch person which resulted in a mild roar and small push from the birch person who had been bumped into. The birch person who got pushed decided to push back in a display of dominance.

The conflict got interrupted by five smaller creatures walking in the woods, they were humans, they had suits on and they came carrying strange equipment. The small hoard started slowly moving forward to the creatures, they tried not to scare the smaller creature since they knew that the creatures were easily skittish. They noticed how ever that some of the smaller creature were carrying weapons. Stringer weapons. When the smaller creatures walked closer to the birch people they stopped. Stefan could see their movement, “They are up ahead, be ready” The other men in the party were nervous like they had never been before, the noise of strong and heavy feet clamping down in front of them didn’t help soothe their nerves. They didn’t know if their weapons actually did anything good against these creatures. When the party came closer to the birch people Stefan hissed out a “Hush, Wait... I need to get closer, stay behind me”. Stefan moved closer with the cottonswab. When he got so close to one of them that he could almost touch the creature, he accidentally made eye contact with the creature. He fell in a trance with the red eyes staring into his soul.

The universe is evil, it feeds on anything and everything, It creates conscious beings only to have them serve as food to other self aware creatures. A meat machine that never stops taking, it is always rotting and always eating. But there is a cure, There is something that can stop this carnage of the universe from eating, chewing and hurting everything you ever known. The answer is simple, The answer is to fight against it. The answer is to destroy death, recreate birth and shape life.

Being stuck in a trance with the creature, Stefan felt alone, what he didn’t realise that behind the soldiers stood ready, and they were frightened. The creatures standing three meters tall were like giants, and their crude movements made the troops even more skittish. Stefan managed to get himself out of the trance. He managed to pick up the special swab with the lid. The Unity Biotech corporation had given him with a special swab, it had been coated with some special material that would make the cells stick better when he would swab the creatures, It looked unnecessarily expensive.

Stefan lifted the swab up towards the creature that had been staring him in the eyes. For some reason the creature seemed uneasy. Perhaps the birch person was reading the body movements of Stefan. He had felt uncomfortable with the entire situation. He regretted that he accepted the deal from Johanna. All he wanted now was to be back with Sofia, How would he explain this to Sofia, He was just going to out and get some Liquorice and now he was on a mad quest to pull a swab on these things. His phone was turned off, he didn’t want

The birch people

any distraction and he also didn't want Sofia to call him, It was dark and she certainly would worry from him being gone for such a long time.

Stefan raised the cotton swab to the creature who in uneasy movements, The creatures uneasy made the soldiers even more on the edge. This wasn't like the first time he had met them, this situation felt unstable. Perhaps he shouldn't have been so curious he thought to himself.

As he managed to get closer and closer the creature moved back, despite that he managed to just in time get a swab from the creature's leg. As soon as the swab touched the creature's legs, he felt his heart drop, he had been so focused on getting the swab that he had completely forgotten the danger he was in. This was a three meters tall creature with immense and no one even knew what it was, it could have been a super predator. Now he knew that his only goal was to get himself out of that situation. He started backing, but the creature now started to change its tune and get increasingly more daring. As Stefan went backwards the birch person moved closer. It moved its large and strong legs. Each step crushing the mud beneath. Stefan started feeling that the creature's foot steps were more intimidating, The hoard which had been somewhat docile had seemed to get more interested in him, they all started ganging up on him, as Stefan was backing the situation made him lose his foothold and he tripped over a twig. He could hear gunshots coming from behind, it was the troops that had seen the entire interaction, at first they only fired warning shots. The shots had only made the hoard angry. Stefan backed despite being on his back, he quickly tried getting back on his feet. The noise of gunshots made him of course not want to get up but he was now more afraid of the creatures that were starting to stampede. He managed to get up on his feet and he ran towards the troops, he could hear that more than one of the creatures fell on the ground. He had for the first time in a long while actually felt afraid for his life, Still carrying the bag with the swab he yelled at the soldiers to head back. The shot a few times then backed, shot again and then backed away. Even professionals don't know how to react when something they have never seen before happens. They did however have a lot of training but nothing truly prepares someone for giant tree creatures made from birch. The sky was a dark blue and the forest was even darker, the noise of gunshots could be heard for a long distance.

The creatures that had been shot laid motionless on the wood floor covered with leaves, moss and mud. Around them the birch people gathered in curiosity.

Chapter 6

Sofia was laying alone in their bedroom and crying. The pain of feeling abandoned, or the pain of not being wanted. She sat up with tears in her eyes. The pain was unhandleable to her. This of course wasn't the first time she felt this, Ever since she was a kid she has had to struggle with depression. The autism didn't help, especially as a child since every time she acted out the teachers would just throw her into a separate room when she got too much for them to handle. She would never forget how worthless it made her feel. It was difficult for her to handle her emotions especially not when she had to suppress them for a long time. It felt like the world was going to explode, other times when she felt especially sad it was as if she was falling in a dark hole without end. This time when she was laying in bed crying it wasn't because Stefan had not come back, she knew he would show up eventually. Her partner's disappearance had been more a colour

After sat up she started rocking with her hand on her head, she was hitting herself, Calling herself stupid. The tears were running from her cheeks and she was screaming without any

noise coming from her mouth. fell on her side again and was laying crying in a feethal position.

The first time Stefan saw her like that he did not know how to react. A part of him wanted to leave and never look back yet another part of him wanted to take all of her worries way. The good triumphed the bad, this time.

She knew it was better to cry now instead of holding it in. If she did that her entire week would be ruined. She wondered where he had gone, She wondered to herself how she could possibly keep going if he didn't come back. This was the first time in a long time that she had confronted the fact that he might not be around for ever. She thought to herself that maybe she should call her mother but she knew that she wouldn't listen to her. still she always felt better after talking to her mother.

The feelings just kept on going, she started loosing control over her face movements as she reached newer levels of anxiety.

In it all there was a pause. Everything stopped. All the sadness, all the anger was gone.

The wind was making an awful noise outside the house, almost screaming as it hit the buildings, the trees and nearby buildings.

These kind of attacks were frequent but what she now saw was something that she had never seen. It was something bad, something growing. It was a yeast, or perhaps some kind of fungi. The vision she now saw infront of her was of a tree, it was decaying, The tree which had ones been strong and living was now moist and damp. The three was rotting from its root and the yellow and brownish rot was spreading up the tree. It was in a state of senescence.

Laying still on the bed it seemed as if the attack was over, she now felt a little better but there was still a shame. She wished she wasn't like that. She felt jealous of other people who clearly didn't have the same problem. She felt worried about her boyfriend who she felt she a burden too.

Seeing the tree rotting and decaying gave of an ominous threatening feeling. She thought to herself that she was happy to have the life she lived despite the few downsides. On the grand scheme of things she didn't have it that bad but that didn't matter to her.

Uno was walking in fast past and breathing smoke from his lungs. His heart was pounding and he thought that if anyone saw him outside the hospital they would surly tell the guards. He had forgotten the very few items he had left and he was now back to square one. He wasn't sure were he was going to go but he felt that he had a message he needed to tell someone. The further he walked on the walkroads he started to get close to section of houses. He couldn't help but to feel jealous of the people inside. He dreamt of how it would be if he was one of those people. If he had someone who loved him, who cared for him, A clean house and a happy life. If he would have seen himself from someone else's perspective he would have immediately understood why but he couldn't see himself that way. He didn't want too see himself that way either. His feet were starting to feel cold now.

He didn't know where to go, what to do or too whom he could talk. but as he walk the walk ways he passed under a bridge, just as he went under the bridge he could see blue lights reflecting from ontop of the bridge. He knew that the police would be looking for him, but he also knew that they would never bother to actually get outside their car so he just stayed put. Of course having fled from a hospital before they had the opportunity to write a letter of forced care they would have gotten one by now at least. His heart was racing.

As some time had passed he he had managed to make his way to a small church village in the area. the church village was a local pride of the town section considering that villages

The birch people

had been using them for over 600 years, now of course only to preserve the culture but at one time the buildings were actually used by farmers in the region. They would back in the day travel for several days to get to church for different religious ceremonies and they needed some place to stay. The house looked from the outside like rustic red cabins made from timber loggins, on the inside they could vary. Some where more modern whilst others had preserved more of their historical significance. The church village was made up of hundreds of these little cabins and they gave the place an eerie feel to it. At the center of the town there was a large church building. The building itself had been around since the early 1300's yet it had been renovated all the way from the ceiling to the bottom.

When he saw the church Uno thought to himself that it must be closed but he tried pulling every door just incase there was one that had been unlooked. It wasn't until he got the large door that lead straight into the church that he managed to get inside.

Uno was suprised to see that there were people inside the church. They looked like him, Unwashed, unshower and without a decent haircut. There were some immigrants, some alcholics and the only women he saw were elder women. There were only one set of candles that had been lit and they were in the center, other than that there were warm light that gave the place a cozy vibe.

Uno felt at home and laid down on one of the benches. It was hard and made out of wood which wasn't a problem for Uno, sleeping in a warm church without a blanket was a lot better than sleeping outside with one. He sat down for a minute to calm his nerves. He looked around the room at the faces of vagabonds of all kinds of sort.

He looked a little bit too long at a man who was sitting in the other section of the church long benches. The man quickly started approaching the Younger Uno. "It looks like we have another guest, where are you from" the bearded vagabond said. "I'm from a lot of places, but for today I just came from the hospital". The vagabond seemed less than enthusiastic at the answer he got from the rude younger Uno. "The hospital, what were you doing there?" "I saw something and passed out. I was surrounded by birch people and the I woke up from the hospital, all happy and sound, where are you from?" "I'm from the south of sweden, did you say that you saw the birch people?" "Yes I did, and I wouldn't recommend it" "what happened? were were you when it happened?" As the two men were talking their voices echoed through the entire building and the other people were starting to get more interested in what the two men were talking about. The two men could feel that they were getting the attention of the crowd. "I felt a message, I can't really say what it was but it was like, that feeling you get when help someone across the road, yet at the same time it was scary" "Do you mean because they were threatening?" "No it was more scary in the sense that we are all going to die. But it also felt like we could stop if we all just started changing the way we live." The room looked confused and the bearded vagabond took it upon himself to ask the question what it was that they should do.

"We need to work together, we need to believe in ourselves and actually see that we need to this by ourselves. If we don't do it than no one will do it for us"

Tova was sitting at her lab desk, there were many odd colour vials and bottles which she had previously custom ordered. It was very important that cells that were going to stick to the different plastic. In the vials there were strange liquids ranging from blue to red and purple. The most neat looking would be the black one, it was meant for a special plasmid which was expensive to design for the company, The true cost lies in the time that it takes for her to research, design, analyse and redesign. The actual price for the plasmid itself was significantly less. every design had to be patented for each bit of progress they made. There

The birch people

was a strict routine for how they should act if the results were positive as well as if the results were negative.

Her eyes had a painful strain and she had felt that her head was developing a strong headache. She thought that it was typical of her to always take on more than she could handle. Sometimes she wondered if what she was doing was actually making her happy, she was always working but she didn't know what she was working towards, her goal.

Tony came in the door.

"What happened?" "We got the contract, but it wasn't a good contract", "How so?" "It was the standard deal, we even guaranteed secrecy and certain exclusivity" "And you didn't think to ask me if it was okay, What if it creates a conflict with an existing project" "you don't don't think I haven't thought of that? the deal doesn't conflict any of our current projects, and it will not make any conflict in the future" "What makes you sure" "This project was for me, what the contract basically means is that we are not going to be doing that particular kind of testing for any competitors, and I don't think that there are a lot of those kinds of competitors" "now you want us to become a simple testing company, you know we need to create our own solutions, you are the one who started this company, you know what our objectives are" "You know that our real mission is" "How is running small tests and doing small cell line prep work in anyway going to complete our mission" "this deal is a friendship deal, I can tell that this kind of work is what we want to be doing, also we set a name for ourselves when we are the ones to explain where those creatures come from" "And cell line prep is going to get you there" "It's a small step in the right direction". They left the room to join one more meeting where they would discuss liabilities and rights issues. The Company had been growing ever since Tova took a step down, she was very intelligent but she lacked the kind of thinking that was needed in larger companies. She had always been good at seeing details in things and she had a knack for digging into things.

When Tova was a child she lived in a blue house. It might have seemed a little abnormal during the summer but the house really stood out during the winter. The house was on a hill that had a private road that led to it. There was a small balcony but there wasn't a lot to see. Her mother had been the greatest inspiration in her life, she stayed at home instead of going to work, something which was very rare in Sweden during this time. She took care of the kids, she cleaned the house and she made sure that everyone felt welcome in their home. She loved reading and it imprinted on the young Tova who wanted to be like her mother. Tova's father was a hard working man and that part had also imprinted, she pitied her father for working so hard and never spending any time with the children. It was life's cruel irony that she would end up like her father. When Tova was in her teenage years her parents told her that her mother had started to develop endometrial cancer and was at such a late stage that they had surgically remove her mother's uterus. After the surgery Tova had to live through horrific trauma and after treatment. The after treatments however had not helped and the cancer managed to survive and spread. Her father actually started opening up his feelings during this time, he had promised her mother that he would be there for Tova, he shared how much he loved her mother but he would never tell her how helpless he truly felt. For the first time the rugged and strong man had been completely at the mercy of the universe, he had realised that everything he cared about was pointless, he had wasted so much time he could have spent with her.

Tova started looking her up in her room and escape in the world of books. At that time she mostly read fantasy and romance. At her school she had some friends but they wouldn't stick for too long.

When she was sitting alone in the office she took a deep breath, Johanna didn't get to have a lot of alone time, something she very much needed. Johanna had a position where her appearance would reflect on the company which always meant that she had to look perfect. From a legal perspective it didn't matter how she looked but she knew that the real world worked differently. People would much rather do business with someone who looks sharp and on point rather than someone who lags behind in that area, it wouldn't matter if the person did a better job or not. She also always had to be prepared, it was very important to not look like she had any weakness. This constant state made Johanna very on edge. She minded very much what she said because she knew that it was very important that her words were not used against her in a legal sense. The biotech industry had a higher demands when it came to understanding the law.

There was a knocking on the door and one of her employees came in. "The amounts of sites are increasing, we have had reports of sixteen sites now, and that just in Sweden" "Has it gone international now?" "Yes, we've had two incidents, but it's strange, they are in completely different parts of the world" "And they are still docile?" "As far as we can tell everything seems alright." There was a pause "Have they gotten back yet?" "No, but I'm certain they'll be back any minute now." "I like your shirt by the way". The man couldn't help but to feel flattered, little did he know that it was a long worked out strategy in marketing behaviour. Johanna had gone on many seminars on how to behave in the business environment. Something she had figured out herself. The man left the room feeling happy, mostly revealed at her reaction to the news. Johanna didn't know how to react to the news. The phenomenon seemed to be spreading but more importantly it meant that there might be competitors that were trying to reach into this untapped potential.

As she walked down the hallway a guard passed her by, he gave her a slight greeting, she kept on going. she moved down the hallway and then later she got up the stairs followed by a right turn, There was a heavy steel door with red and black tape on it, clearly meant to deter anyone from walking in. Johanna opened door. On the inside there were plants in glass jars, growing in red agar. There were entire rows of the in vivo plant environment and they were staked vertically. There fridges that had glass doors on them with warning labels.

Inside the church all of the drifters were sitting in a circle surrounding Uno has he told them about the truth he had now envisioned. "There is so much hatred in the world, there is so much pain and so much selfishness and so much self loathing. Imagine one person who only cares about themselves, what would they accomplish?" An older women yelled out "Nothing" a younger man shouted "Why should they?" "When we die everything that we once were disappears, it will never had existed, so either nothing matters, in which case why should we not just end it right here and now... or everything matters and everyone matters. When we help each other we are strong, we help others iit matters to them, and then they matter to you." The crowd was listening to him intensely following every word "The birch people wants us to help each other, to love each other, because our existence is intrinsic just like their existence, they have learned that we must then give ourselves the worth we deserve, because no one else will. " Uno was standing and making hand movements as he talked. He was holding up a rock. "Do we matter this rock?" "No" a person in the crowd answered, "Does this rock care if we die a painful death?" "No" "We are the ones that need to give ourselves that worth, Since there is no justice, hope or fairness in this world, is it not our responsibility to make justice and to create a world without pain?" The crowd was murmuring in agreeance. The winds were blowing strong outside. "The world works in an odd way, it goes in waves, and when you work hard and suffer you get rewarded for it at a later time.

The birch people

We must work hard, we must suffer and we must be creative in the way we do it. We need to do it goal oriented, that which truly is important, the really important stuff.” Uno was speaking more hectically, without shoes and dirty clothes.

The next morning all of the drifters and homeless people had to leave the church, they were only allowed to come back after dark. During this time Uno knew he had to find some food. He asked if he could get help to steal from the nearest supermarket, he asked a young man who seemed older and like he was in a similar situation. The man was tall and skinny. They went to the store, it was a big store with a lot of space and very few guards, the two men knew this scenario easily. They would walk in, split apart and pick up and put down a lot of different items. When they found an item that they actually wanted to keep they would put it in their pockets or wherever they could hide it and quickly leave. The truth was that there was probably no need for such secrecy since no one would stop them. Even the store guard would not confront seeing as how it would mean more work for them. Their real job was after all to just walk around the shop and be deterring agents for insurance purposes.

Moving along the different sections he found a dish of fried chickens. He picked them up and compared them. There was an older woman working behind the meat section who was looking at him, he smiled at her and went away to a section where he could be a little bit more alone. He slid the chicken in his trousers. Uno's dirty black work trousers were perfect for hiding things. All the clothes he wore were too large for him which made it easy for him to hide things. He didn't even feel nervous about stealing, it wouldn't be the first time he had to steal. He moved towards the cashiers and he just walked straight passed. No one said a thing and even if one of the cashiers would have noticed anything they would not be able to chase after him. It was also that moment where it would be possible for a security guard could place their hand on his shoulders. As he walked passed the cashier line his heart started racing more and more. He got on the other side but his heart wouldn't calm down, he kept on walking towards the door, he felt queasy as he approached the door. The first foot step outside the store gave him an instant surge of dopamine. He was finally past the door. He didn't want to bother waiting for the other guy. He didn't care about him, he only needed him as a distraction. He went on the side of the store and took the bag of fried chicken out. To Uno this was the tastiest thing he had tasted in a long time.

He felt full and the short time left over from the feeding frenzy gave him a small window to reflect on his next move. He started out on the road next him. On the other side of the road there was a small meadow with high grass swinging with the wind like waves in an ocean. After the meadow there was the wild, the woods. He could feel something from the woods.

Laying dead on the ground the small group of birch was staring on the falling comrad, the ground covered in mud and leaves in different colours, three meters long laying on the ground, it had started swelling and was covered in yellow and browning pus. There were veins moving all along the creature's body, it was heavier and had lost its graceful appearance and now looked more like something that should be lit on fire. The corpse moved as if there had been a small earth quake. The group of birch people looked at the creature. The creatures were behaving as if they were curious. The smaller creature that had attacked them had ran away, what had they done. The corpse started getting up from the ground, still swollen and covered in rot, it had gotten slightly taller than the others. As it was standing on its feet it moved closer to another of the birch people and the two creatures shared eye contact. There was a mutual understanding between the creatures. And the non mutated birch person opened its mouth. The rotten creature started spewing liquid into the

The birch people

healthy birch creature. It stood tall and swallowed all the yellowish white pus that spewed from the creature. The rotten creature had done its work and let go, the creature turned to another birch person and put its hands on the birch person's face. It spewed even more pus into the second creature.

In the dark a rabbit had hidden behind a fir.

Stefan was sitting in a room with the man with the blue shirt, next to him was a box, in the box was the sample that they had retrieved. "The mission didn't go as planned" "What happened?" "I got the sample but... A few of them got shot, we didn't have a lot of time to get out of there". "Good, thank you for what you have done. Don't feel bad about what happened it was just a matter of time, in biology we are used to disappointment". The man picked up the sample and walked out the door with a smile on his face. This wasn't what Stefan wanted, to see all his hard work just went out the door with a stranger and never to be seen again, he felt uncomfortable with the man leaving. When Stefan went to see the birch people he thought that he would get to communicate with them again, not scare them off and kill them all. He hadn't seen his phone and he didn't want to.

Stefan shut the door and just waited as his heart beat had to slow down so he could think. He had to go back to Sofia but he knew that she was going to be mad at him, and she would most likely ask him a bunch of questions. He would think to himself whether or not he should just run back inside and demand that they would pay him a fortune in TSEK, MSEK and RSEK. Sitting in his car Stefan would look back at the building which had a futuristic feel to it with painted glass windows that were the size of entire walls. This experience had been very stupid, why did he take such a risk and why did he just leave without telling Sofia, He felt ashamed of what he did and now only wished he hadn't been so foolish. He started the car and her favorite cd was playing, something which reminded him all the times they had driven together, it was an epoch in his life that he would always have. As he drove off on the e4, on his way to once more visit the one person he always took for granted.

He paused for a second. He started to remember how nonchalant the man in the blue shirt had been, why would someone act so calm in the face of a deadly creature which was literally an abomination of what should be possible.

Stefan pressed down on the gas, Put the gear in reverse and turned around. On his way back to the office his mind was racing, of course there was more to this, there couldn't just be a thank you and that would be it. Why would those soldiers be so skittish, they were trained professionals, there was something that wasn't right. He drove up to the back entrance of the building, he waited outside until there came someone who opened the door. He would pretend he was delivering some equipment and had forgotten his key. The friendly scientist didn't really bother too much what was going on. He wasn't sure in which direction he was going but being alone and unfollowed in the Unity Biotech Corporation's headquarters was surely a feature many business thieves would be interested in. He thought to himself that there would need to be some kind of laboratory or an office where he could find something of importance, if nothing else at least he might be able to get back the sample he just dropped off. He was sure that there wasn't anything good about it. He found an elevator and noticed that there was a bottom level. The level seemed to have been pressed a lot showing by the mark having gone bad, a lot of people have had to press it. He pressed it. The elevator was modern and made of chromed steel. It was clear that it was built to last many years. There was a small humming noise which indicated that it had a sound dampening effect. As the elevator hit the lowest floor Stefan didn't know what he would find. As the doors opened he was surprised to see an empty long and narrow hallway. It was clear that no one had

The birch people

mindful how the old wall paper looked, the place needed renovations. He looked around him as he went outside into the corridor to make sure there was no one around. He felt his chest tingling and he was nervous he was going to get caught. He had been happy to get down from main levels since he was certain he would eventually be seen by someone. At the end of the corridor was large door, it was metal and green. Stefan had to lift a metal stick in order to get it to open. It was heavy.

The room was massive and full of tanks filled with strange liquids, there was also a lab that looked like the miniature version of bioreactor, there were tubes filled with all different types of colours and sizes, The ceiling had strong lights and there was a purple hue coming from the back of the rooms. There were petri dishes and chemicals of all kinds fridges with glass doors filled with bacteria cultures. Stefan was sure he hadn't seen so many tubes in his entire life. Who ever had been down here sure didn't have a lack for money, He went further down.

The room was full of isolating chambers, They were like glass cubes with holes for gloves, this was something the biologist would use frequent to create a sterile environment but these chambers were different, they had tubes and gas tanks connected to them. There were purple light above the tanks for some reason. As stefan started moving closer one of the chambers would shake a little bit. It was enough for him to be on edge. He slowly found himself walking closer and closer to the glasscube.

Inside the chamber was a rotten piece of wood. He had worried all for nothing, but there was something that made him mesmerized about the object, It was as if the object had not belonged there.

As he turned away to look at some vials the small pieces of wood moved an inch. Stefan quickly turned back, he knew that he saw it that time. It was definitely moving. He was about to open the chamber but quickly stopped himself and looked at the piece of wood.

The small wood pieces started almost vibrating in its small chamber. Stefan didn't know what to do beside keep watching, he slowly started backing away and as he did all the chambers started shaking.

There was a yellow goo that came from the logs that started crawling its way towards the glass on the chamber, it started building what looked like it was vascular nets on the glass on the side of the window. He knew now that they were up to something horrible. He wasn't sure what they had down in that lab but he sure didn't want to stay and find out. He grabbed his phone and took pictures of everything he could see. It wasn't by pure but rather pure lack that the thought came to him, now he would have evidence, even though he didn't know what he even could use with it.

The sound of foot prints were coming from the corridor. He quickly looked around to see if there was something he could hide under. there was a large drape that must have been used as a room separator or something, he quickly took cover behind the drape, he considered what would happen if they found him. The thought was nauseating and gave him a light pain in his stomach.

The two elderly women walked in the room. "I can't imagine they would have that power legally speaking, have you given them the results?" "Not yet, I'm still finishing the final data entries, I don't want to present such a report without double checking the report." "The dead samples can only get us so far, have you tested the live swab?" "I thought they sent that to a private lab" "They did what? On whose authority?" "Johanna I think" The elder woman left the room. The second woman went to the bench where they kept all the vials. She started inspecting the vials and filing in a paper report, Paper has after all been better for organisational work than digital writing formats, nothing beats a good old paper and pen.

He knew that it was now or never. He grabbed a knife that was on a nearby bench. He started walking up on the woman... he had never been quieter. He was planning on threatening her to tell him what they were planning. The elderly woman who stood with her back turned has no idea he was standing behind her with a knife facing her direction. As he was moving closer he could help but to feel sorry for this woman. It could traumatize this seemingly sweet woman, he could only imagine all the things she has endured in her life. He started feeling bad and started backing. He couldn't do it, he didn't want to traumatise her for years to come, instead he started backing out towards the corridor quietly without the elderly woman knowing.

The first day of the new economic system had come as a shock to a lot of people even though it had been well prepared in advanced. Tony was at the time standing in a till about to pay the cashier when the paying terminal had started blinking a message he has never seen before "System Error 500". At first he just stood there with a blank expression on his face. He looked at the pretty cashier girl like he expected her to know what was going on. "I think you are still using an old money card, we have upgrade in accordance with the new law" "Sorry, I had completely forgotten that was today" He switched the card with a green metallic card with an M on it. At the initialisation of the system the government had sent out the cards to every citizen in Sweden, After it had been cleared that the system would be put in place there was a large debate if people should be allowed to choose themselves how their money should be converted, and how much should be the persons own money and how much the government should add. There were those who argued that if a person didn't have any money during the system change they should be compensated in an averagely split amount of MSEK and RSEK and TSEK since they thought that people with relatively small money should also get a little extra amount beside their regularly converted money. There were many factors that had to be debated. The reason why there was a need for a longer debate is that questions regarding wealth distribution, political power and real world improvements had to be discussed. It was also important to find the things that the experts had missed. Debate and discussion has for many years been an important tool for professors and scientists to broaden the scope in real world application,

Then Tony only had 500 MSEK on his MSEK account, he had prepared like most people had, There were some people who would try to capitalize on the idea by renting out food growth storages. They were rental storage units that had been pre equipped with grow lights, fishtanks and Soil tubes. There were also places where you could rent chicken coops and bee harvesting equipment. These rental services would get paid in TSEK but they would let people grow their own food and trade it in for MSEK.

Of course it was possible to grow trees, cotton or other materials which could be used for trading RSEK.

A person who had resources or RSEK could use TSEK to pay people to improve the value of their RSEK.

During the debates there were many who questioned why there were only three types of currencies. Experts thought that since the systems purpose is to create value it should be more logical to also include a knowledge currency and a Health currency, since that would make it easier for technology and well being to flourish, they proposed that the systems would be too similar to the older system and the result would be that people would most likely just start chasing the different in the thoughts that it would make them happy, even though it wouldn't. The debates were strong and there were many who worried that they would get bestolen of all their money. The greatest attention came from outside the country.

The birch people

The international community had reacted differently, especially companies that had invested a fair amount into the country, including lenders and stakeholders. When the final decision came the Swedish stock market plummeted. There were special offices created with the single purpose of maintaining currency trading and conversion. I was now going to be against the law and use any money beside the currency system, if the law was broken there could be severe consequences for the perpetrator. The fun thing is that since the Swedish government no longer supported the old currency as well as all the shops dropping the old currency system the result was that eventually most people stopped using the currency. It was of course possible to use international currencies however it was only in circles that dared to defy the law.

Sofia was emptying the compost into a large bag of dirt she had filled up from outside. Perhaps the mixture had too much compost but it didn't matter, in the worst case she could always run it through the process again, pouring the mixture into equally large containers. She had in advanced prepared mushroom spores by cutting the stems of old mushrooms and placing the caps gill-side down on a piece of wax paper. She added the spores and added a tiny plastic cup and corner of each container, she filled it with water. She then covered each container with plastic wrap. Last step was to poke small holes in the plastic with a fork. When she had finished all the containers she added them in the storage. She also had to harvest some of the salads since they were growing to big. Tending the home made food system they had made filled her with calm and gave her stability and a sense of peace in an otherwise strange world she didn't fit into.

One of the roosters from the small barn started crowing. All the animals in the barn started making strange noises. Sofia started getting a bad feeling and thought that she didn't want to get too close, she didn't know what it was, at the same time as she felt like locking all the door she also felt curious as what was making all the animals making such a noise. She put on an autumn jacket and walked out into the green garden. It was damp and grey. When she got closer she started noticing the contours that came from the woods, there were large linings of people, huge, at first they looked like the birch people she had seen but these one were acting different. It was hard to tell in fog, she felt something was wrong and she was all alone. She started slowly walking backward as the three meter contours came from the woods. they were almost floating in the mist. They started stretching out their large arms in her direction. Sofia started to panic, she now started realising that they were running towards her faster and faster. She started picking up her pace, she turned her head back only to see that they looked different, rotten and bloated, no longer thin but brownish black with yellow veins going through their bodies. One of the creatures started getting closer and just as it met her pounced on her with its entire strength, The power of the pounce slammed her on the ground. Sofia must have broken at least five bones in her body. The creature grabbed her arm and started pulling, Sofia let out an immense scream of pain as the creature ripped arm off. Another one of the creature used its hands to pierce through her chest and ripped her entire ribcage open, blood was gushing everywhere. The creatures started feeding on her. The hoard of mutated birch people were now like animals in a feeding frenzy, these were not the same creatures that had first showed up, they were something else.

Tova was holding a package in her hands, It was the size of a milk carton, covered in yellow tape and warning stickers. She knew what it was. It was her first job from the unity biotech corporation. Since the package she checked her email for a protocol but she was surprised

The birch people

that she hadn't received one. Her first thought was that they would be waiting for her. She wanted to open the package but since she couldn't be certain of what was in it she thought it would be best to double check with Johanna. She called Johanna. "The package has arrived, the protocol your people were supposed to send has not showed up yet." "There has been a change in protocols, we need you to study a sample we have found for you" "We are going to need you to help us study a sample". "Is there a reason why there was a change in protocol?" Johanna was surprised at the tone she got from the Privat researcher. "We had a sample that has a higher priority and your expertise is required for this type of sample" There was a moment of silence as Tova took the time to consider her answer, she bore a slow sigh. "I am still going to need specification of what you want me to research. Has the sample been freeze dried? How should I store it? You can't just surprised me like this, I need time for preparation" "Yes, of course we are so sorry, if it wasn't an absolute priority we wouldn't be ask you this." "You don't need to worry about it, prokaryotic or eukaryotic cells? is it an animal cell?" "We don't actually know, The sample is a swab taken on a birch person"

The pupils in her eyes dilated. This is what she had wanted the entire time, this would be an opportunity to claim the result on a creature that defied everything she thought she knew was true. Thoughts and ideas were racing through her head, This could be a breakthrough, she would be the first private researcher to run a complete sequencing on a creature that defied all she thought she knew. "This will be a lot of work, I am going to need to run a gross examination, Replicate and sequence the cells, There is a lot more to it." "This is something that is going to be done, we are willing to pay what it costs. I hope this will be the start of a very long relationship".

Chapter 7

Uno leaned his back on the wall to the store, Enjoying the last bit of taste still stuck in his mouth. He threw the bag on the floor, it didn't matter if the world was going to have some trash in it, after all it would just be covered in dirt after a year. The idea about climate change felt stupid to him, people where focusing on such small things, the only good throwing that piece of trash would do is save the commune money on clean up and he couldn't care about that, not when he had to steal food to get by.

He could here the sound of children playing and people talking, it felt nice being around people but at a safe distance. He started thinking about the trees and what they had showed him, he wanted to run off and yell to people to start focusing on what they needed too do to save themselves from themselves.

Staring out at the tree line he saw a movement, it was a small section oof the high grass that made a small movement, he could feel that there was something that was going to happen. The feeling starts growing so much that he could feel it in his stomach. uno started moving towards the heaps of people that were running in and out of the store in the parking lot. As he was moving along the wall he was taking help from the wall to move forwards. The pain had gotten strong that he could no longer walk normally. When he managed to pass the corner of the building he want out into the crowd. "You all need to change your life, you are going to die! what are you doing!" People started lookiing at him as if confused if he was talking to them, "Change everything, the trees have shown me a warning, the birch want to help us". Families with children would make subtle insinuations to their children to avoid the crazy shoeless man. "Why are you not listning to me, you are all wasting your life

for these horrible stupid reasons. You need to change your course, you could be curing cancer, you could prevent starvation forever! Are we not the ones who create money? are we not the ones who decide what we deem is power? Power is not controlling people, power is life, it is not being a slaves to productivity!" As Uno was yelling on the street he started feeling so sad and so overpowered with love for the people that were walking by that tears started falling down his cheeks, he thought that there was something that wasn't right, he had a feeling that there was something evil coming. He cried while standing on his knees. People were starting to stop, there were whispers. the people in the small crowd that had formed started looking around wondering who would be the first to call the police. As he was crying he unintentionally glanced at the forest lining.

The hoard slowly appeared from the forest lining, Uno started pointing too the forest. They kept their attention towards Uno, He was laying on his side with a red face and tears on his face. He was pointing with all his strength, in the crowd there was an older man that turned a look at the forest. He just stared at the creatures that were slowly approaching from a distance. A young girl who had turned alswell tried getting the attention of her mother who was focusing on Uno, More and more bystanders where turning theiir gaze.

Uno could tell that there was something strange about them, they looked swollen and deteriorating.

An older man was moving closer to the creatures, despite them being large and intimidating, The crowd was standing still as the elder gentlemen slowly approached the hoard.

When they they were only a small step from the man the stopped. The man could tell there was something wrong, the creature standing in front of him felt a foul stench, it was impossible to ignore. The creature had a brownish blackish body, it no longer looked like a tree and more like mulch banned together.

The creature quickly grabbed the mans head with a strong grip. The man went from fear and panick. His pupils were fully expanded and he tightened his neck muscles from the strength of the creatures. The creatures used its large hands the pierce through the flesh and penetrate all the way down into the core of the mans skull. He felt an immense powerful pain. The crowd was completely lost as to what it was witnessing. Uno could only feel sadness at the pain the man felt.

The creature looked up and roared with its entire strength as it pulled the man's head in two. The mans body with spine, blood and muscles exposed was dropped on the ground , covered in dirt from the pavement below, the two split ends of a head with pinkish and gray in the middle was still attached to the corpse.

As they all started realising what it was that they had just seen they noticed that the hoard was now moving in closer at a higher paste than before. The panic over triumphed them.

Uno who was crying on the ground went from an absolute sense of loss to a complete state of fear. He quickly rolled over so that he could get into a position where he now could get up faster from the ground, Hiis survival instincts started kicking in and he emidiatly started running in the same ddirection as the crowd. The birch people were faster than some oof the older people in thhe ground. The hoard went through them with a strong and massive force , ripping their arms apart or directly just breaking slamming down with their powerful arms, breaking their necks or ppermanetly scaring the smaller creatures. They were not themselves Uno told himself as he was running, he now starting to feel even more panicked. Some of the creatures went inside the stores and others ran directly into the windows of and balconies of the aparments next to the store. the image of people being ripped apart and being powerless to do anything would scar him for life. Uno had seen some

The birch people

horrific things in his life, he had been reduced to the same stature as an animal, following its instincts by fear completely unable to control its behaviour. There was a shame to it. the fear of seeing the bodies and knowing that he could easily be the next victim of the crowd, There were screams of pain coming from the nearby building. He had been running towards a parking lot. Having gained some headground on the creatures he had time to try to jank on all the car doors to see if there was any unlocked ones. None of them were unlocked. He kept on running until he had gotten so much space in between the creature that they could no longer be seen, He knew though that there were probably a couple of them still chasing him, As he was running he found a small vending machine, At this moment he absolutely didn't care about the world and he grabbed a large rock from the ground and crushed the glass to the vending machine. At least he could get something to eat later, He grabbed as many candy bars as possible and kept on running. The pain from the rubble was hurting his feet but the fear had made him completely ignore the pain, he kept on running at full speed without a second's doubt. As he was running he started seeing people who were still walking towards the area, as he was running he was yelling at them to run. Completely unaware of what had happened they would ignore him and keep going, with a sense of curiosity and a small pebble of fear.

Uno managed to get to one of the larger roads, he could see cars running passed, He started thinking on where he could go. if he went back he was dead, but in front him was more forest. If he went right he would eventually be trapped by the forest. Going left was his only possible option but was also in a slight direction of where the creatures came from. It could be possible that they would have made it to the main road. Uno was realising that he had two choices, either possibly get trapped or risk encountering the creatures again. He couldn't help to feel conflicted in his feelings for these creatures, they were not the same creatures but it was obviously them. His divine truth that had come from but how was it possible that they could become such horrible creatures, he felt betrayed. He felt betrayed by everyone he ever met, the government, himself and now these creatures. He was surrounded by betrayal but deep down he knew that he was the one that had unreasonable expectations of everyone else. If he got caught by the creatures alone there was no chance he would be able to outrun them with their large legs, he had been lucky that there were others there to distract them from him.

The red house that had been shared by Stefan and Sofia was empty, there was not a single person in the area. The lights were still on in the house but there were no one inside, the barn animals had all been killed, the bits that was left from their corpses had been put in a pile by the creatures. Sofias remains was mixed in with the animal organs and flesh. There was a dogmatic symbolism in their placement by the infected birch people, like there was still something left. The miniature wind turbines were moving and changing with the wind as they were making a strange hissing sound.

At the top of the pile of flesh laying on the ground there was a hole in the middle of the meats, it had been hollowed out by the infected creatures. Inside the hole there was a small sprout growing in the middle. It was clearly feeding sustenance from the flesh but there was nothing that would indicate how fast it was growing. The creatures had left the area moving down the into the meadow, killing every animal, man or child on the way, and after each carnage they had put all the pieces of flesh that was left over from the feeding and added into a pile, with a sprout in it.

Made from swollen rotten wood these creatures had mostly lost all of their birch bark, some had lost more than others and there were those that looked more like they had scabs

The birch people

with small pieces of birch bark still holding on. The hoard has grown bigger. And they were moving along the roads.

The hoard suddenly stopped in unison. They didn't swing their arms or adjust their stance, It was as if a button had been pressed.

The news that morning had reported of attacks all over the world, when watching the news that morning Tova started to realise the seriousness of the situation. The sample was currently being replicated so that she could get more to work with. There was a morbid fascination in the attacks, she couldn't help herself from being fascinated. There was a part of her that felt terrified, and another part that wanted it all to end. When she had first opened the box she had been overly happy that the sample hadn't dried out or gone bad, She was going to determine the cell type. She had also used a special type of equipment that used vibrations as an instrument of cell determination. The problem with the swab is that it hadn't actually gotten the cell types from the creatures but rather the bacteria and fungi that was on the creature. That being said she was unable to properly determine the species, she thought that there must be multiple new species on these creatures that were hitchhiking.

Since she had no idea what she was dealing with she used the highest standard of security to make sure that the sample wouldn't get polluted or that it would spread in any form. When streaking the petri dishes and separating the different samples she used an isolation chamber when streaking the different samples. It wasn't easy since she accidentally managed to streak multiple different viruses to the new petri dish. She had to redo it several times in order to get petri dish with only one type of virus or one type of yeast. She added antibiotics in the agar of the different petridishes to isolate bacteria she didn't want, it also gave her clues as to what kind of bacteria she was dealing with. She prepared a few samples in agar and she sent it off for genome sequencing from a secondary company that had some more professional equipment. The biggest problem with biology is the cost of equipment. This is where Tova had been brilliant in being able to reduce costs, Not only did her small corporation give her a better control of expenses but her direct involvement gave her a chance to create innovative solutions where they saw that costs were running away.

The more she read the news the more pointless all of her work had felt, after her mothers passing she had gotten the profound realisation that the most important thing in life is people, all of her work was a reflection of that. She was such a rare and unique person that the truth is that if she wouldn't be doing what she did, it would not get done by anyone. Most people don't realise how few people actually dare say, I will cure the world. It wasn't easy especially since she didn't have the formal education but she was a person who dared working her ass off to do things that not the most powerful leader of the world was able to do, and it wasn't even that hard. She had read the books, She had watched youtube videos and she asked people on forums. It was difficult at first but with time it got easier. She wasted her money on tubes, centrifuges, she made a budget for herself on how much she would let her spend on biology, the first step was buying books, after that she started learning about how she would figure out how to make her own agar. She then learned a bunch of interesting things. "Workaholics change the world" she thought to herself

She was surprised at how close the attacks had been but she was absolutely certain that the government would take care of it. The Swedish government was not famous for their military strength and infallible police units but they did have the trust of the people. Apparently some of the attacks were still going on. There was no one that could tell how many people had been found dead, there were many bodies missing and it was a nightmare determining who the bodies belonged to, running scans would be close to impossible.

The birch people

Uno didn't want to get trapped, he choose the path the strayed to left, even though there was a risk that he would get caught by the creatures. There was the noise of sirens from a distance, it must have been the police, he couldn't imagine that they would send out ambulances without clearing the area. He couldn't be certain their routine when there was an unknown threat like this but usually when drug house got raided the Ambulance had strict instructions to not approach until they were certain that risk had been adverted.

He walked on the road feeling at a complete loss of thoughts, It was surreal that the creatures he had so loved would be able to turn into such things, He knew that there had to be a reason for what was going on, unless they were trying to tell him something. Perhaps they were sick, perhaps this is what they were trying to show him. Did we do something to them. He was at a complete loss. For a second he could help but seeing the image of the attack infront of him. Staring out into the long road he was surprised at the lack of cars. Above the trees he could black smoke raising into the clouds up above. A fire must have broken out in one of the buildings that the creatures invaded.

Uno had managed to walk a long distance and finally started meeting a flash of headlights that were lined on the horizon. It was clear that it was a blockage of some sort, he couldn't tell wether or not they were police oor military units but he was either case very happy to see them, He picked up his paste as he was getting closer to the line.

Uno was met with the warmest welcome he had in a long while, They probably thought that he was just another survivor of the attack, His lack of shoes could be caused by him running away or leaving his house to early. They gave him a warm blanket and some food to eat and some coffe. Uno hadn't gotten this kind of treatment in a long while. One of the lead officers asked him what had happened, Uno looked at the officer for a while. The officer could recognise that there was something eari in his look. Uno let out a light chuckle as he had realised what had taken place.

There was only one reason why what was happening was happening, because we tought we were safe, and didn't do anything to stop it. Because we thought someone else were going to take care of it.

He started bursting out with laughter. The police officer couldn't help but to feel uneasy at the mans reaction. "They showed us the truth" Uno kept on laughing. The officer assumed he had been so traumatised that he couldn't think straight, and perhaps that was the case.

When the police officers looked at their journals they saw that there was an order to take him in and give him forced mental and substance abuse treatment. The situation ment that they couldn't spare any non essential staff.

The officer went back to Uno. "They want us to take you in to the hospital for forced treatment, why?" "It's all a big misunderstanding, I left earlier than I was supposed to, You don't need to take mme in, I can go there myself and clear up the mistake" The officer took a breath and breathed for a second. "Promise me that you will head straight to the hospital to clear up the mistake" The officer was staring him in his eyes and it made Uno feel uncomfortable but at the same time he had butterflies in his stomach, He might actually get away with this. He looked at the officer. "Yes of course, I promise, I promise" The officer let him go.

Uno took the opportunity to leave as quickly as he possibly could. He started walking towards the direction of the center of the town.

He looked at the trees that had risen on the side of the walkway but now he looked at the trees with fear as if they could somehow peer themselves from the dirt. He wondered if they could hear him, if they could see him. What if they had thoughts or dreams. The sky was

dark, there was a full moon and white cloud stretching the entire horizon. What if the clouds had thoughts or perhaps the moon. Walking on foot gave him a lot of time to think about what he was doing, he needed to save humanity from itself, but he also needed to save himself.

Stefan was sitting in his car when he received the phone call from Sofia's mother, the news that she was assumed dead was something that he wasn't prepared to handle. He felt his entire being shrink until there was nothing of him, it was as if nothing made any sense to him. The sound of her mother's voice had at first confused him, he only cared about soothing her mother until the call ended and the true nature of what had happened hit him. Thought after thought came to his head, it couldn't be true, how could it be true, she will be at home.

His eyes started tearing up as he was trying to tell himself that it wasn't true. After a while he couldn't help himself from letting it take over. The tears were gushing as he couldn't believe what had happened. As he slowly came to terms he started going from shock to anger. Anger at himself, anger at the trees, anger at Sofia and anger at Johanna for sending him on that stupid task.

He didn't have a home, he didn't want to go back to his job ever again. He had wasted so much time on that stupid job that he forgot to treasure the one and only thing that truly mattered to him. He didn't have a plan in life, all of his plans had led him to something that he didn't actually want.

He started the car. He had only one sight in mind, He wanted to go home, to see what had happened, if the house was still there. If he could still smell the scent of her on their pillows. He had been such a fool for leaving her alone, for arguing about such small and stupid things.

The drive on the E4 had reminded him of the first day they had seen the creatures. He felt disgusted knowing that those creatures had laid their hand on her. How could it be that the very same creatures that he met could do such a thing, he didn't want to believe it.

The sky was turning darker as he drove, it was a sign that autumn was going to fade soon and turn into winter. From the powerful and nuanced red, yellow and green to peaceful black and white, the road would be easier to see. He wondered why the creatures had turned the way they did, had it been his fault or the fault of the soldiers. The darkness was even more soothing for his eyes now, than it had been when it first started. The drive was pleasant despite the circumstances. He had thought to himself what would happen if he would speed up and drive into a tree. Would he disappear into darkness, Would he become one with the universe. Would he be greeted by some strange almighty creature. The tears were falling down his cheeks as he thought of her, how could he have not been there for her as he should have.

Stefan had never been religious but he had always been fascinated what death would be like, it wasn't a morbid curiosity, rather an existential curiosity, why were we all doing what we are doing. Stefan had come to a strange conclusion of his own, of course it probably wasn't entirely correct and there was probably something to improve his self-made answer to the problems of the universe.

The closer he got to the house he started noticing weird things, There were no cars on the road was one of the things, as he was driving where he would before be able to see sheep or other farm animals there was nothing. As he was getting closer he saw the first turn. He started the blinker on the right side, lowered his speed just to be safe and prepared to slow down. As he approached went up on the field. He stopped in the next turn as the sign instructed but there was no other cars in place. It was very quiet even for the small area he

was in. He knew that there was an attack but he was surprised that there weren't any road blocks.

He saw police cars and ambulances that had stopped on the road. The situation now seemed all the more real. He felt confused as to what had happened to her, not getting a definitive answer had given him an excuse to pretend that it might not be correct. The more cars he passed he started getting sadder and sadder realising that it was real. After a while he could keep on crying. He stopped on the side of the road and straight up started crying his eyes out. He still had her liquorice that he never gave her. His entire eyes were filled with tears. He had lived a decent life for a long while but it wasn't until recently that he realised how good he actually had it.

There were three little knocks on his window. Stefan dried of the tears from his eyes and looked over. It was a police officer, there was a part of him that felt terrified ever since he got his ticket for crashing his car into another car, he lost his driver's license for two months and Sofia had to drive him to everywhere he had to go. Another thing that now reminded him of how truly wonderful she was. She had done so much for him.

He rolled down his window. "You can't go forwards, the road has been shut down" "I actually live here so I'm just going home" "No one is going in or out, those things have killed everything in site and they are not moving" "They are still here, and you haven't done anything" "There is nothing we can do we don't have the right equipment" "The right equipment! You have guns don't you, why don't you try using one of those, this is unbelievable, you have one job and you are all failing at it, you know what, you are all a bunch of thieves and bandits stealing from the working man" The officer looked shocked at the response from the tear eyed man. "Sir, I am an officer of the law and you cannot behave that way towards me". Stefan felt like he had had enough from everything and started his car. The officer's first response was to back away from the car so as not to get hurt.

Stefan floored it. He drove up on the road again not caring which lane he was driving on. He swayed away from the vehicles that had parked on the side like a British house road. After driving a bit he came to a wooden blockage. He drove straight through it. The road that came after it was straight and relatively smooth. No cars had followed him.

After a couple of minutes of driving he saw the first pile of meat. It was surprisingly large and there was fog coming from it as if it was still warm. He immediately stopped his car and looked out at the meadow. He started noticing that there were more than just one pile of corpses. He couldn't avoid the pools of blood that were sprayed out everywhere. He didn't know what he felt, Sadness, Anger, hatred or disgust. It was as if he could taste what he saw. Something poignant and yeast like.

After the shock had settled he started up his car again. He kept on driving, slower this time since he was busy looking at the field to look at the carnage. He also kept his eyes on the trees as he did very well remember what it looks like the first time the creatures went out onto that road. He couldn't believe that the creatures had done this, if they were even capable of doing it.

He came to slower part of the road, straight before he usually takes a right turn. As he turned right he saw them. The hoard. The entire hoard was standing there, completely still and not moving an inch.

At first he felt angry and only wanted to ram them full speed. The sight of the carnage that had been displayed out on the field had made him realise at the danger he was now in but he didn't care. He kept driving until he got to a point where he had to stop. He stood still and so did the creatures. As he was staring at their rotten bodies, knowing full well that this must have been the last thing that Sofia had seen, he wanted to cry. There was a part of him that

felt that it was a sacred sight in the sense that it was something that they shared, and there were no more things they would share again. He took in the moment before he started driving again.

He started his car again and slowly drove past the apathetic creatures. There were many of them but after a while he had passed them and he could start driving faster again. As he had past the hoard of infected birch creatures he felt an immense of relief, he hadn't realised how uncomfortable he had been until after he had passed the creatures. They could have at any moment turned their faces towards him and ripped him to pieces.

When he got over the hill with his car he could see it, the pile of flesh dumped in a pile in their backyard. He immediately stopped his car and ran out of it. Straight through the ditch and up into their garden, He would instantly recognise her clothes that had been ripped apart, and meshed into the pile of meat. Before he got to close he was hit by an instant smell so rank and disgusting that he fell back at a distant. He fell on his knees and started screaming. His eyes got so full of tears he couldn't see anything other than a range of colours.

There was something that moved in the pile rotting flesh.

Unos feet were cold, wet and dirty. The walk into the city center had not been easy but it wouldn't be the first time that Uno had to go on such a walk. The City center was surprisingly quiet at night, the entire main road was void of life. There were no people walking across the town center. He wondered what people would be doing now, perhaps they were at home with their families or maybe they were stuck watching the news. The attacks would be a rude awakening for most people who had their lives locked up in their homes and their everyday routine. He found his favorite staircase, it was built in alignment with the local shopping center a place. It had become a hangout for a mixture of people, drug addicts, young people and immigrants.

The step was made from a kind of metal net. It hurt his bare feet but it was better than sitting on the cold pavement. He didn't want to sleep in the forest now after what had happened. He looked around and considered all the things that he could make a fire out of. He looked out at the concrete land scape and realised that if he emptied all the trash cans he could probably make a fire of some sort.

After collecting a pretty large heap of trash he used an old lighter he had to set the entire thing on fire. it took a while for the fire to get started but once it took hold it was a powerful flame. The smoke was black. The staircase had an outdoor ceiling which made it perfect incase it started raining. At the time Uno felt happy that he had actually manage to create the fire. The only thing that would make the entire thing better would be if he could find a blanket or something similar but for now the little he was wearing would hafta make due. The days events had made him realise how much worse he could have it, after all he was still alive.

With the moment of calm he had time to consider if he was doing what the birch people had wanted him to do, live the way the wanted him to live. He thought to himself that he had to be the one to teach the lessons he saw. He would also need to live by them. It wasn't enough for him just to say it, he had to do it. He had to create the change he wanted to see. For now the only thing he wanted was some shoes and a blanket.

He could hear people walking by, they looked at him without saying a word and just kept going. He instantly started feeling anxious about getting call out on making the fire but he knew they wouldn't say anything. It was more possible that they would acll the police but he

The birch people

was certain that the police were busy with other things at the moment. Whilst staring into the fire he could see the carnage that had happened before his eyes.

Before Uno had time to think further he noticed a pair of hands approaching his fire, he looked up and saw a man. The man had a long black beard and he didn't say anything. The man and Uno didn't say anything to each other, they both just stared into the flames and the black clouds that were coming from it. After a while there had been more people that had started gathering around the fire. Perhaps he was not the only one who preferred to be in the center of town rather than its outskirts. There was light mumbling as the fire was making the noises that fires usually make. It was peaceful after all he thought. "Did you see what happened?" an elderly woman blurted out whilst looking at Uno. "Yes, I was there" There was a quiet murmuring from the group. "How did you get away?" "I don't know, I just got lucky I guess". "We heard it from our friend but we thought he could be serious. It wasn't until we saw it on the news that we actually realised what was going on, those creatures are sent from hell." Uno looked up and his piercing blue eyes stared straight into hers. "No they are not, They are angels, angels that have fallen" He couldn't stop himself from letting out a light chuckle at the cheesy phrasing. He had a subtle smile on his face. "The birch people were not the ones responsible for doing this, this is the work of the infected birch people" "You saw yourself what those people could do" "Yes but I also saw that they weren't themselves, they were rotten" The small audience seemed to have different reaction to what Uno was saying. He even recognised some of the faces from the church.

"The birch people showed me how beautiful we all truly are but those things that did all of those horrible things, they were not the same, they were corrupted and vile, just like we are." "Don't pretend like you're so innocent" a man said from the crowd "I'm the least innocent, I have done such horrible things to survive, such horrible things get by" There were people walking away, but there were a small amount of people who stayed. They wanted to listen to him. "I need your help, we need to find a way to save these creatures. Bring them back to their previous state" "How can we do that?" "It's easy, we need to spread this message, and hopefully maybe they will see that we are worthy, We need to help the trees, there is a reason why they are attacking us. It must be because they want to spare us of our horrific existence" As the words came from his mouth Uno realised what he had to do, he had to help the infected creatures spare all of humanity from ourselves, that must be it, that must be the reason they are doing what they are doing.

The rain started coming in and the group of people were hidden beneath the outdoor roof on the staircase. Uno had told them that they needed to talk to more people, to spread out his message so that they might be able to complete the task the creatures were asking of them.

Tova could feel her entire heart tremble and her entire body was feeling weak. She had gotten the results from the company she hired to perform the genome sequencing and she now realised that the bacteria she had discovered had no known properties to such an extent that the bacteria might belong to a completely unknown branch of evolution never before discovered. The information was so big that she hadn't a plan on how to go forward. After sometime of thinking she realised that she needed to give the results to the unity biotech corporation.

"The results have gotten in" "And?" "It's better than we could ever have imagined, how this could ever have gone unnoticed before seems like an absolute impossibility to me yet there it is" "Good, We want you to send us the complete report and extra cell lines of the project." "Yes of course, I would assume that you would want to publish the results immediately" "We

The birch people

are not going to publish anything, and we do need too remind you of the secrecy clause you agreed to when you took the deal" "What are you talking about! That would be so stupid! imagine all the good it could do" "We are a for profit corporation and that is it, We need you to send us the report or there will be consequences" Tova had no other choice but to clench her fist in silence and agree to the terms of the agreement. She prepared the report and the cell lines and sent them off. She had not felt so bad about doing her job since she first started. Her first day as a business owner was one of the worst days of her life. The experience had left her almost traumatised. Every month she had been terrified of not being able to make enough money to pay her debt owners. And every new month the uncertainty grew. Eventually she came to the conclusion that she needed to start signing long term contracts and that had been her saviour from fear. She started learning more about how important the law was in economics. And in that sense also in science.

Tova had saved a few cell lines to do experiments on despite not having permission to do so, She of course knew that they would never give her the go ahead if she asked them. She had planned a small experiment to extract plant cells from a leaf and then subject it to the bacteria, She could then view the result under a microscope. It was of course very important that everything was isolated so that it wouldn't get polluted. The process would take several hours. The process of extracting the plant cell would take hours. Transferring the bacteria over to the cells was another process all together. She would give it a couple of hours to cultivate.

The time that she had to wait she spent watching the news. The attacks were getting more frequent and people were now fleeing to the main cities. It seemed almost as if the infected creatures only came from forests however there were some exceptions. Police had been busy setting up barricades and prepared helicopters for air attacks.

The cells had finished getting exposed to the bacteria. Tova would observe a strange behaviour in the bacteria. It had the ability to take over its host. Tova did not know what she would do with this information but she knew that it had something to do with the attacks, and she was the only one who knew it.

The strong secrecy agreement with the Unity biotech corporation would mean that any results she found would end up on their patents and they could be used for whatever ends the corporation wanted. It was a dilemma, She had already bent the rules by cloning some samples of her own. In her experience with the law as a business owner she knew that law worked in mysterious ways and something that may seem straightforward could often be misinterpreted. The law isn't something that should be followed and obeyed but rather something that should be questioned, interpreted and implemented where there was a need for it. As a business owner the only reason she was allowed to run her small enterprise is because the law didn't prevent her from doing it. There was of course many things that the law prevented her to do especially in the biotechnology sector. The law would often favor larger institutions and the people who made all the decisions could rarely be found for questioning. The Swedish bureaucracy was a well oiled machine when it came to hiding accountability and silencing free thinkers who questioned that authority.

Tova's freethinking is one of the reasons she attested authority. She couldn't stand the idea that there was anything that she wasn't able to do. Even change the definition of life itself, yet with life there was a mutual understanding. She could change the essence of life but life had a strange way of punishing those that didn't use that power for good, or at least it would seem like it.

She had created an open document on her findings and shared it on all her forums. The drive had been read by all of her friends and co-workers. Some people criticized which she

welcomed, it was almost as a complement that someone would take the time to find out flaws and ways to improve the paper. Even inviting up for intellectual debate which more often than not would lead to new ideas.

Outside her office she could see the traffic moving faster than usual. For a second she was pulled out of her bubble and she would find herself in the place she was actually standing. Despite the office having been a safe space for Tova, now the sounds of cars screeching and people packing made her realise that the situation was more serious than perhaps she actually imagined. She started thinking about what would happen if the creatures would find themselves in her town. What would she do? The thought was so surreal that it made more sense that looting would be more of a problem than the creatures themselves. It would seem far unlikely that the Swedish population would start looting, it didn't lay in their culture. However it would be possible that they would buy out all the stores and that power and internet would shut down. She had a lot of resources for growing food ever since the MSEK currency system came to place, she also had solar panels which might prove themselves very beneficial if there was a black out. The small grid however would not produce as much electricity since it was autumn. Internet would most likely be her biggest problem. She lived and breathed the internet. Without it she wouldn't be able to do research, she couldn't share her results. Anyone would be horrified without the internet but for Tova it was her biggest source of producing. She had her books and they could last her a long time. When she looked out of the office at the blue sky she noticed that the sky had a red yellowish burn to it.

Chapter 8

The pile of rotting flesh had a stench that would forever be associated with the loss of Sofia. The view of the pile had made him nauseated to the point that he couldn't help himself from puking. The smell from his own vomit was a comfort in comparison. Hunched over leaning on the side of their house he tried getting a grip on himself. The reality of Sofia's death was sinking in as he now finally knew where she had disappeared. He didn't know if it was anger, loss, hatred or love he felt. The tears were gushing from his face as he started punching the wall. He hated himself for leaving her alone, he hated himself for not giving her the attention she deserved. She made him feel truly special, like he was the smartest man in the world even though he was far from it.

Stefan immediately froze. He turned his gaze towards the pile of rotten flesh. There was silence. He heard it again. There was a small movement from the pile. He was suddenly filled with an immense anger as he realised that there was the defied Sofia's peace of rest. The wind made a hissing sound that filled his soul with fear, yet his anger was stronger than his fear. He moved closer to the pile. The closer he got the more he could see the contours of the different flesh, it was easy seeing the difference between a goat's leg and a piece of human skin being intertwined with an organ. He wanted to cry from the thought of what those creatures had done to her. The most beautiful thing in his life.

When he got close enough to look in the center of the hole in the pile all of his emotions were swept away as he couldn't explain what he was seeing. It was laying in a fetal position, the small legs were thin and striped black and white. The creature was breathing in and out in a peaceful trance.

Stefan didn't know what to feel, he wanted to stomp it to death, his curiosity stopped him. When Stefan got too close to the creature it started waking up. It started slowly standing up.

It had been covered in blood and roots. The birch person had clearly been feeding on the nutrients from the pile.

It was an insult that creature would be laying there in the remains.

The small creature stretched out his hand as the first birch person had done. Stefan slapped away the stretched out hand of the smaller creature. The creature looked as if it didn't know how to interpret the gesture. There was an innocence in the creature's eyes.

The small creature stepped back in a natural cation. Stefan wanted to place all of his anger on the smaller birch person but he felt so emotionally tired that he decided that it was better to just leave it well enough alone. He had nothing to live for, there was no longer any reason for him to do anything. He moved back towards the wall and leaned on it so deeply that he sat down on the ground with the wall on his back.

The small creature followed Stefan at a distance. Despite the creature being small had a long stride and it made slow moments yet still faster than a larger birch person. It didn't have any leaves yet.

The bizarreness of the situation had made Stefan complete ignore the pile, or the loss of his girlfriend, he looked at the creature who made eye contact with him.

He wondered why the creature would not leave him alone. The creature wasn't threatening or dangerous at all. It behaved more like a stray dog or a lost child. As they shared a moment of eye contact there was a part of the creature that had first reminded him the first time he met Sofia.

They had both made plans to meet at a cafe in the south part of town. Stefan would always show up early but this time he was running late. When he went down to the parking lot to start his car his car didn't start. Stefan wrote to her and asked if there was somewhere else they could meet up, He apologized again and again and promised that he wasn't trying to pull up an excuse. As unfortune had it, her car wasn't starting either. Sofia wrote that she was going to get a ride from her mother.

When Stefan made it to the cafe at the town center he had some time for himself. He had been rejected before so he thought that she probably wouldn't even show up. He ordered a large coffee and sat alone, watching his phone.

Sofia started running late and he thought she had to have stood him up. He became a little sad but he was also a little relieved that he didn't need to be nervous. Before he knew it a small and short woman seemed to pop up from nowhere. She just stared at him. "Are you the one?" "Stefan, yes I am, are you Sofia?" "Yes, Sorry for being late, My mom had to help my brother so it took a while".

They were both very nervous. He would never forget how her eyes moved. She had a condition which made her eyes shake when she was nervous or when she was concentrating on anything.

The creature had the same eye movement which Sofia had. It was eerie at first. The creature didn't have the red eyes that the other birch people had, It had green eyes.

The birch person stretched out its hand again. Stefan felt rude and decided to lightly grab the trees hand instead. As they felt each others hands he realised that this creature wasn't like the other infected creatures. He thought to himself that this creature wasn't the one who did that thing. It was clearly a child. Perhaps it's because of the trauma or maybe it was because the creature had reminded him of Sofia but he couldn't very well hurt a child despite it being one of those creatures. Perhaps this creature would hold the answers to what was going on.

He knew he had to do something. What would Sofia want him to do. This thing came from her body. The thought made him shiver with disgust. The only thing he wanted was to her

The birch people

laughter again, Smell her hair and taste her sweet lips one more time, but he wouldn't. The only thing he had left of her was the child of the monsters that killed her in the first place. But it was still a child. The creatures were clearly rotten and infected, and he knew that in some ways he was responsible. He dialed Johanna.

"I have something for you that you are going to want", "What is it?" "It's a child" She immediately knew what he meant. "How did you find it?" "Sofia gave it to me, She's dead" "I'm so sorry, what happened?" "They killed her, Ripped her from arms off, fed on her, Mixed the leftovers in a pile of animal flesh". the words were taken away from her as she didn't know how to respond. There was a moment of silence. "When those trees were shot to death, did they turn into those things?" "We think so yes" "You need to tell me everything. I went to your lab, I saw the tanks, now tell me!! What is happening" "You weren't supposed to see that" There was a moment of silence. "At first we noticed that there were branches that had gotten a kind of infection, at first it looked like a yeast but we later realised it was actually a new strain of bacteria that can change its molecular composition to become a kind of yeast. This gives it a strategy to first get a hold of its host and then later take it over and merge with it. It kills the host and takes over" "So when we killed those creatures, the Bacteria or yeast or whatever it is, took over, and spread." The realisation that he was the one who was responsible for the attacks and the death of Sofia struck him like an arrow from god. "I need you to bring the birch child to someone, She is an entrepreneur and a biotech innovator". Stefan took a moment to think, he had already sacrificed so much getting involved with them in the first place. "So? Will you do it?" Johanna knew that she had asked too much, and that there had been a very real possibility that he would say no. "Please, we need your help" She was being legitimate, she really did need his help. There was another moment of silence. "Sure" Stefan answered with the taste of regret on his mouth.

Outside the shopping center there was a crowd of a few hundred people. They had stood outside almost the entire night, it was cold, and humid. They were not just the homeless, some had just left their homes in fear that there would be another attack. Others were just bystanders who had nothing better to do but to listen to the comforting words of the man speaking up front.

Uno had ranted all night. "....Well, well well... After all this time we now finally can see with open eyes. They have shown us that we need to work hard, that we need to sacrifice and bleed. They are not our friends, they are our saviours. People working their entire lives, sacrificing their time to pointless garbage, so that they can't afford to buy more garbage, all mean while their tumors are growing bigger and their fat is getting loser. Why do we do it? We all know that the most important thing in life is people, It is us ourselves and the entire world around us and it is only now that we realise that we need to work together to save ourselves..." The people in the crowd were scared, They needed answers and there was nothing more comforting than someone that had answers.

After the night had passed Uno found himself for the first time not on his own. A young woman named Malin greeted him when he woke up. She was slim, brown and she had arab features, She was pretty in a way that made usually would make him feel threatened. The young woman had brown eyes, something which entranced him. The walls of the stair case made was warm heated by sunlight, There was still a small bit of summer left during the day but there wasn't going to be for very long.

He felt ashamed when he looked at her, He was after all a bag of garbage that had somehow managed to survive. She was the image of perfection. He thought that she must spend

The birch people

alot of time grooming herself to look so pretty. He knew he could never keep a girll like that, he wasn't good enough for her and even though she might be interested in him at first he couldn't imagine her staying for to long.

The young woman wore hijab, it gave her sleek look. "I get lost sometimes, and I don't know what to do, I'm selfish and when those creatures invaded our town, I was certain that I would make it. I left my child, to die" There was a moment of silence as Uno did not know how to response. The young woman started crying and hid her face. "How could a person like me ever do something good for anyone else" "I am so sorry, That must be a horrible thing to hold on to, But just because you have done something bad doesn't mean you can't be forgiven or do good things" "But how, How can I be good when I've done something so horrible" "You were not the one who killed the child, Those creatures were. But do not hate those creatures, No they are a blessing, They haved saved you." The young distrought women didn't say anything. She stood there with tears in her eyes listening. "When I was put in the hospital because of those birch people I realised that they have given me a purpose, and they have given one to you too, You must change your wayss, and start being the change that you need to be in order to save the universe. That child is not dead, Nothing ever truly dies." "Yes... Yes you are right, This will make me a better person." "The time we have on earth, The time that we are a live, that time will always have existed, and time isn't something that travels backk and forth but rather something that stays still. In the same wayy like water can change shape, but it is still always water, so is the time that we spend here on earth."

The young woman left the stair case. An elderly man stepped up to visit him, He had trouble moving up on the staircase, He seemed grumpy and angry. One of the people who followed uno stepped infront of the old man as to prevent him, Uno signalled that it was okey for the elderly man to approach him. "You say that we need to help people, But I've lived my entire life by helping people, Why should I now that I am closest to death not live the last of my moments I want to be selfish, I want to not care about other people, Have I not deserved this?". Uno wasn't ssure if the man made him angry or sad. "Is it not obvious? You are the one who is dying, You are the one who is getting older, Yet you think you shouldn't do anything about it? You are the only person who is responsible for your life and when you help other people you are heping your self. Some people are weak because they think they can't do anything to change their situatioon but they can and they are strong but since they don't see it, they wont do it. Yes you are old, And if you spent the rest of your life trying to find the fountain of youth, You could find it, and if you don't it would have been a good way to spend your life." Uno noticed that his story made him loose the interest of the man, perhaps he didn't believe him. Maybe the old man didn't care. "I don't want to live forever. I want to die happy." "What do you think is going to happen when you die?" "Nothing, It will become pitch dark" "Either everything will go away, Everyone that has ever lived, all the feelings you have ever felt, everything will disappear and it will be as if you have never existed and in which case nothing matters or the alternative will happen. It could be that everthing that has ever happened will always have happened, a state of intrinsic existantance and that way everything that has every happened will matter, and every person that lives after your death will matter." "Even if that is the case why should I care about anyone else". "There is no justice in life, people are born disbled and we die in horriible ways, There is no negotiations but since there is no justice in the universe we are the one responsible for creating justice, for creating a world were people are happy and when we all work togheter for this goal, the world gets better for everone annd before you know that will find it's way back to you. If you only care about yourself, you shouldn't be surprised when you

The birch people

noiced that no one will do anything for you. It doesn't matter who you are, how old you are, gender or cree. This is the law for all. We make the world we live in."

The old man left the stair case the same that he came, grumpy and slouching. He did not want to admit it but what Uno had said had stuck with him. He thought about what he said and tried to come up with reasons for why he thought Uno was wrong but he would instantly contradict himself by explaining in an inner monolog why Uno had a point. Long after he left his mind kept on working through the problem.

There were alot of people who waited to talk to Uno. The town appeared as if it was on fire by the warm light.

There were no mountains were she stood, besides of course the metaphorical obstacles that prevented her from living the life she thought she deserved. the world was big yet she was small. A person like Tova did however the ability to change the definition of live and everything in it yet she was smitten but how she felt when she had her hand on the window, It was cold to the touch. The window felt strong and that gave her comfort if there ever was a riot. Her phone was ringing. It was Johanna.

"I have a job for you, and it iit going to be outside the framework of our agreement." "We can always have that discussion later, What is the Job" "There is a child" Tova froze up. There was soo much she could learn. "Where did you find it!" "There is a man who we have been in contact with and without going into detail, He found it. I'm not to sure on how coopertive he will be but he has promised to bring it to you" "what should I do with it? Run a genome sequence?" "We want you to find out about everything you can about this creature. There is one other thing that you need to do" "What?" "Take care of iit, Raise it. Teach it. We need to find out everything about these creatures and what they are capable of and this is the first sample of a containable Birch person that we have" The phone call ended with that piece of information scratching the inside of Tovas mind. She couldn't help but too wonder what Johannas plan was with all of this information. She had received instructions that the man was going to move in her general direction, she had no idea how long it would be until he would arrive.

There where groups forming larger and larger now as the populus had started fleeing the city. She no longer dared going into her own apartment anymore and just stayed at her office. Her offices which was an interesting area all on it's own also had a very unique smell. It had hospital smell to it combined with the smell of agar and ozone from the machinery. She went over to her tap and poured up a glas of water. She was shaking as she was pouring it. Perhaps she needed to drink more water she thought to herself. There glas felt cold in her hand and it felt heavy for her to hold up. It had a slight after taste of metal, nothing that was noticeable unless it was actually pointed out. How was she going to take care of a birch person she thought to herself. She was not prepared too take care of this creature. There was always the possibility that she could lend out her office, Since it had glas walls it would be a perfect observation deck, unless that is to cruel. She considered what the creature would eat, Sunlight? Sugar? Nutrients from soil or yeast extract?

Tova hadn't eaten in a while and she could now hear her stomach churning. She didn't have anything that she could eat at the office besides homemade sallad, She was tired of it and thought that maybe getting a little variety could be worth it. Since left her office. She locked the door and made sure that all the lights were of, manly because she believed that it was unnecessary to leave them on. She had an autumn jacket which fit her very stylishly and would keep her warm even during the transition from Autumn to winter. She had tight

fitting jeans where you couldn't tell that she was actually wearing leg warmers underneath. The closest store was a Swedish supermarket on the edge of the town center.

The walk had been well needed. She had stayed in her private lab for way to long, the news hadn't helped either. It felt strange knowing what was going on yet at the same time the world was just like it always had been. The birds were flying south in unison in hopes of finding food during winter. The fresh breath of air was cold on her lungs and she no longer felt as worried about what was going on in the world. As she was walking she considered if she needed to buy new shoes soon. Winter would usually come quickly once it came and it would always be a struggle for her to buy new winter shoes before it became too late. She wanted the ones that looked sophisticated and mature yet still had the ability to put on quickly. Shoes with long shoe laces had never been in her favor ever since her last pair, they took forever to put on. As she was walking she couldn't help but to be fascinated by everything around her. Everything that she could see was either made of cells, made from cells or were allowed to be there by cells. A thought that to her was incredibly peculiar. She wondered if she needed some more supplies in order to take care of the creature she had promised to take care of. Food was going to be the least of her problem. She had enough SEK to buy pretty much whatever she could find use for in a supermarket. There was the noise of cars speeding coming from within the city, it made her feel intimidated and worried about whether it was actually worth going to the store. Maybe she should have ordered home delivery instead she thought to herself yet she out reasoned herself by suggesting that they probably wouldn't do home delivery at this time. If there were too many people flooding in too soon it would be possible that the supplies would run out.

Stefan was sitting in the car with the engine running. The birch person was laying in the back seat, sleeping and clambering on to the seats. The seatcovers were strewn on the birch child's arms and legs laying on the seats. The creature was on the brink of falling asleep. Stefan didn't know what would happen if the creature went to sleep, would it die, go back into stasis or would something else happen to it. The red colour of blood from the side of the creature would stain the seats. Most of the blood had been absorbed through the creature's skin. Despite the creature being a smaller version of a birch creature it was still tall and slim in body size.

Stefan Drove out the same way he came. He had been anxious about driving past the creatures again but he knew he had to. He slowed down when he met them again. The birch child was sleeping. For some reason he was more nervous this time. Staring into their massive bodies. The steering wheel felt rigid under his grip as he slowly passed more and more infected birch people. They were still standing completely still, Staring into the sky.

There was a small bump on the road. The noise from the bump made the young birch child start waking up. It opened its eyes and stared outside the window. Stefan was keeping his eyes on the creatures. As he had almost passed all of them he studied the detail of their faces. At first they had a similar look to a human face but when one looked closer you could see the structural differences which indicated a completely different set of evolutionary threads. As if nature had tried mimicry.

The creature was staring him in the eyes, they all were. They had all turned his way and was looking at the car. Stefan's heart started pounding as he realised that they were all staring at him. The creatures started moving towards the car. He pressed down on the gas as hard as it was possible, he felt a sharp pain in his heart and he could taste metal on his breath. The birch child started making out a screeching noise in response to Stefan's loud screaming. One of the creature that was standing in front of the car tried grabbing the car. The car would

The birch people

have stood a chance against the creature. Stefan to a quick right turn in order to avoid running into the creature which half worked. His car hit the creature on its side but quickly ricocheted on the right side and managed to get away from the creature's grasp. It was probably the first time he ever drove as fast as the car could handle.

The creatures started running after him at an immense speed. They weren't stopping. He figured that if they continued in this haste they would reach the cars down the street in no time. He had to warn them. The police clearly didn't stand a chance and despite how much he disliked them they were still people. The piles of flesh were still there on the meadows, decorating the landscape. He wondered if there were more birch children there. The idea wasn't that far fetched. He wondered why they did that, if it was for nourishment or if it was ritualistic. It was clear that the creatures were feeding on the flesh but there had to be more than that. Otherwise they could just feed on anything else, Sewage and other nutrient rich substances. He thought to himself that the creatures probably couldn't tell people apart from sewage. They had no respect for our self awareness nor our intrinsic existence.

Stefan had managed to buy himself a head start from the creature which gave him a small window of opportunity. The barrier that had been broken when he first entered was still broken. He stopped his car next to the checkpoint and rolled down the window. There was an older woman standing guard. "You need to take all of your friends, tell your supervisor that they all need to leave right now." "What? why?" "There is an entire hoard of the infected creatures coming this way, You need to tell as many as you can" The woman's shock would appear instantly on her face. She picked up a handheld radio and started contacting her team.

He quickly rolled up his windows and went off to find the researcher.

The city was coloured a reddish dark blue from the darkening sky. The sun was already setting and it was still only five pm. Snowflakes were falling on the town and thusly covering it in a blanket of snow. Uno opened his eyes, he had feared that some of his followers had put on him after he fell asleep. Malin had seen him fall asleep and being sympathetic for the man she couldn't just stand by and watch him go to sleep in the cold without any decent warmth. Malin had early in life learned to treat people with care and respect something that a lot of more people didn't have. Her mother had taught her to be careful who she trusted. Men can be wonderful, until they are not. The lesson had followed her for a long time. She knew that it was impossible to tell them apart, there wasn't one stereotype of how a man behaved. There were of course behavioural patterns and Uno had filled each and every red flag in her book. He did however listen to what she felt and it could be hard to find a man who could do that.

It felt strange for him that there were people who took care of him. No one had taken care of him in a long while and he had learnt not to trust it. Everytime someone had done him a favour it had been to get a favour in return. He would of course do it, whether it meant trading in TSEs and RSEs illegally or if it was to help someone find a dealer. In the world Uno had found himself it was each and everyone on their own yet there was a strange unspoken friendship. The environment was rampant with crime however and if some would find themselves in a vulnerable position odds are that there wouldn't be any help coming anytime soon. The drugs did something to people. It made their way of thinking strange and not right. The blanket that had been used to cover him felt strange, It was the same blanket that his mother always liked, it was made of woolly cotton. It made him warm. He wondered why all of these people could be listening to a homeless drug addict like him. The

The birch people

people that followed him had lost their homes, The people of Sweden had long been secularized and most people weren't religious. The need for belief never subsided and people switched to find unity in their favorite sports team, hope in their children to succeed in life and they got their morals in the mutual belief that they all can have great lives. The attacks had taken their stability, their hopes and everything they worked for. Uno didn't know what to do. It was cold. They all looked at him for answers.

He had commanded that they should start another fire, a huge one. There were no police in the cities besides the occasional noise of sirens singing as the vehicles drove through and to where they were needed.

Some men in the group who worked with contract work took forklift adjusted machines to steal wooden pallets that they could burn. They stacked them in a circle around the shopping center. In the middle they made a bunch of pallets in a huge pile and set them on fire.

Malin stood and watched the fire. There was a part of her that wanted to walk into the fire burn for leaving her child to die. The fire felt warm on her face as it was emanating heat. Uno was happy of what he had accomplished. The snow on the ground made all the garbage and the dirt disappear. Uno felt that his feet were cold and wet, it wasn't as bad as he thought it would be. The heat from the fire gave a strong contrast. It was beautiful to see the fire in the dark. The temperature was still warm considering how cold it would get in the winter. There was a small bit of hope as the seasons were shifting. Uno however only felt fear. He knew that when the crowd stopped looking to him for comfort they would move on, but he would still be homeless, and he had no where to hide when it got too cold. There was hope as they all were staring into the warm flame.

Tova was staring at the frozen food section of the aisle. There were classical pan pizzas, ready meals and frozen meatballs that were greatly overpriced. Premade meals had gotten a lot more expensive whilst raw ingredients had gotten cheaper. She felt though that she at least deserved a treat considering the hard work she was doing. She took a cold pre made meal, Curry and chicken with rice. She bought two grocery bags full of food and materials. She shouldn't have bought so much considering she had to walk all the way back to her office to await the birth child. The bags were heavy and when she went outside she noticed that there was a light cover of wet snow. The air had a freshness to it. It was cold and felt wet when she breathed it in. As a child she had loved the first snow of winter. She remembered how she would run up and hug her mom and dad and then run out. As an adult the first snow of winter was never a happy sight, It meant that it was going to get only colder and darker and that the winter tires had to be on. Tova didn't have a car which was a relief. She had saved a lot of money by not having a car and she had saved even more headaches.

She looked out towards the town center and she saw that there was a red-yellowish hue arising above the city. It was illuminating the sky. The walk back was difficult, it was cold and slippery. The grocery bags were heavily filled up and the longer she walked it felt as if the plastic bags were cutting into her fingers. She felt such a strong pain that she eventually put down the bags on the ground. She stood there for a while. She wondered if she would even be able to carry home the two heavy bags. She regretted buying that many groceries. It was quiet now. There were no cars or people. It was just her. The walk way had brought her first under a bridge and then she was next to a mountain. It was of course not a very big mountain but it did have a lot of forest on it and if you walked deep into enough you would either reach the other side of the town or you find yourself at the top. Staring at it as the snow was falling in the dark she had a bad feeling. They could have gotten all the way over

The birth people

here she thought. The snow was being lit up by the streetlights. The light blinded her so she couldn't see anything inside the forest.

In the forest there was a noise. It was almost as if a reindeer had stepped on a branch. It wouldn't be the first time that a reindeer had made it up onto the mountain considering that they were in the north part of Sweden. As Tova stood there, staring into the dark abyss with two grocery bags the snow was falling down with a soft wind. There was a time when she would run for her life, she only stood there. There were more loud noises coming from the forest. Her pupils were dilated to the fullest they could be as it dawned on her that what she was hearing was the birch people.

She stood still. She wanted to see them but it was too dark. The noises were getting louder and more frequent as if there was a massive hoard hidden in the glaring.

She came to her senses and turned around in the other direction and slowly started walking faster and faster. Her bags didn't matter, nothing mattered she just wanted to live. Her walk slowly turned into a kind of jogging. She started looking back at how her mother died, how it broke her father. This was not her time to die and at the very least to be turned into a pile of meat on the floor, just a puddle.

Every essence of her being was shouting run, to the point where she could feel it at her fingertips. She ran for a long time until she started coming something that looked like a barricade of sorts. There were people.

She climbed up on the barricade of pallets that had been stacked. There was a man on the other side that tried to talk to her. He grabbed her shoulders and tried to make eye contact. She looked at him.

"Run!"

She shook and tried to get out of the man's hand until he let her go. He hadn't the time to react until he saw out of the shadow. Massive silhouettes. The woman was nowhere to be seen. It was surprisingly quiet as the silhouettes swayed in the dark.

"Light the fire!" The man shouted. Malin was sitting in what seemed to be a kind of pallet tower.

One of the creatures started climbing up the barricade, the fire spread along the barricade in a powerful and explosive speed. The creature standing on the barricade turned into pure fire. There was cheer from the people closest to the barricade that instantly turned into pure screams of horror as the creature kept walking. When it came down the barricade it ran up to a man. It was getting more and more difficult for the burning birch person to walk but it did manage to grab hold of the head of the closest man. He screamed in pain the burning hands imprinted the marks of its hands on the man's head. He managed to rip himself out the birch person's grasp. The burning birch person fell on the ground and layed there on fire. Burning. The other infected birch creatures watched the burning pallets. Their faces were illuminated by the flames.

Chapter 8

The snow had made it almost impossible to tell where the lines on the road ran. New snow made it difficult to tell where the center of the road was. No one had plowed the road since the snow had only been there for a short amount of time. It was still snowing. The headlights lit up all the specks falling. The specks had clumped together and made them fairly large. It was dark and Stefan had found it difficult driving in the weather. It seemed to have

gotten worse. Stair out on the road he was keeping his eyes on the signs incase it was time to take a turn into the city.

The birch person was still sleeping on the seat. During his drive he had had a long time to think. He had thought about Sofia and this new creature. There was a cognitive dissonance when it came to his feelings towards the creature, He hated it and cherished it. He wasn't sure what he should name the creature. Something as complex as what he thought of the creature. Perhaps something in latin that meant mysterious or maybe something from myths and legends. He wondered if he should even name the creature anything at all. Driving on the long road there wasn't alot to look at. Seemingly from nowhere the road turned into a bridge and he could look out over the sea. It was dark but across the sea and towards the land he could see building making it higher than the tree tops. There was a yellowish reddish glow in the air, He had passed this part of the road many times before but he was not used to the colour pattern of the glow.

Seeing the buildings meant that he wasn't that far away from his turn. He could make out dark silhouettes on the side of the seaside. They were more than he could ever have imagined. How did they become so many, and where did they come from. There were no answers, maybe he would get some answers from the birch child but there was no chance that they could have become this many by reproducing. They would have noticed if there were a population of these creatures running around in the woods, there was something that didn't make sense.

Stefan made his turn. The creature started waking up in the car and looked outside the window in curiosity. He ended up on a long dark high speed road. A high speed road meant that the traffic had to adjust their driving patterns so that other cars didn't need to slow down. The road was clear except the occasional car drove on the other side. The headlight blinded him when they drove by him. It strained his eyes.

On the drive he could see dark silhouettes coming from the foretglarings on the side of the road. He stepped harder on the gas pedal.

He didn't care about the speed cameras. He only slowed down for the roundabout. It was odd for him to see the city so empty of people. Where was everyone he thought. He drove until he found what appeared to be a wall made out of fire. He could tell it had been burning for a long time since it was more charcoal than wood. Since the road was cut off he considered what he should do. They Left the car. He grabbed the hand of the birch child and walked away from the vehicle. They tried to find a way around the barriers.

Uno was sleeping in the shopping center. The crowd had realised that the crisis wasn't going to be over in a long time and they had resorted to basic survival instinct. It was Impossible for everyone in the towncenter to find a place to sleep so they decided to break into the shopping center and set up camp. The great fire had only worked for a while although it couldn't last them forever, and they need as much wood for the barricade as they could. All of the stores had been opened so that people could sleep in the different parts of the shopping center.

Uno could feel that he had a powerful migraine coming along. One of his followers had woken him. It was Malin.

"We have found something you need to see", "Can't it wait a moment," "No, we have something that is going to change everything. It a birch child" "They can have children?" "I don't know", "Is it friendly? is it one of those infected creatures" Uno had begona putting on his clothes. He had taken as many clothes as they had but they didn't fit him. He had a dark hoodie and a new pair of dark jeans. He didn't look like a religious leader but rather the leader of a gang. "So far we think it's friendly, No it's a birch person. Like the first ones." "I must see it at once""There is one more thing though, there was someone with him" "what of him then?" "He says hhe's going to bring the child to a researcher, I wasn't sure if we should let him go, I guessed you would tell us what we should do" "You did good malin, We can't let the birch child go until I get to see it."

The room was strange, It had been used in the passed as a tools store. In the inner part of the store there was a room with a cage in it. It was made from chicken fencing and steel pipes. It had been made by the followers from materials they had found in different places. The birch child and Stefan had been separated in different rooms and it was only the birch child who was in the cage. There was nothing for the birch creature to sit. As it was sitting on the cold concrete it moved it's fingers in a circular motion on the cage floor.

Uno came in the door and even before had shut the door he ran up to the cage. There was a guard in the room who had been sitting on a wooden stool. Uno discarded him so that he could be alone with the creature.

He circled the cage, getting a good look at the birch child. Taking in every feature. He looked at the creatures eyes which was the most interesting part about it. There was something in them that look like emotions but it was hard to tell. He opened the cage and entered it. The birch child tried backing but was stopped by the fence. He grabbed thee childs shoulder and stared deep into the creatures eyes in the hope that he would be granted with some divine vision of the world but the was nothing besides the dry feeling of the birchbark. He was surprised at how dry and strong the texture of the creature's shoulder

was, as if it would be impossible for the creature to move yet still it did. He thought it would be more flexible based on how the creature moved but it was just as solid as a wooden log. Uno watched the creature for almost an hour before he got tired of it. it was mesmerizing to watch the creatures movement.

Uno went into the other room where Stefan was being held.

"Where did you find it?" "In a pile of rotten flesh made from the love of my life" Uno didn't know whether he was being serious, lying or telling the truth.

"Why did you come here?" "I was instructed to bring the creature to a researcher, when we came to the fire walls we had to stop and where arrested by your men" "They are not my men, they are simply lost confused, and looking to me for answers, they will turn on me once this is all over." Uno responded "Ha! Do you really think this will be over?" "yes, just like everything else, this will go away" "I don't think so, but what do I know", "So who was it that sent you?" "Ever heard of the Unity biotech corporation?" "Yes, they were the ones responsible for containing the first set of birch people, if I remember correctly" "They've discovered the reason the creatures are turning into those things, They're not sure what we are going to find by bringing the creature to that researcher however it will at least be worth the try" Uno wasn't expecting this amount of information from the man. If there was something turning the creature that meant that they weren't punishing them. This was great news in Uno ears. "Will you let us go now." Uno had to think for a second before he could give an answer. "I need to think about what I'm going to do."

Uno left the room with his head full of thoughts, he hadn't decided what he should do with them. The thought of the creatures being infected made perfect sense, why would they show him the truth of the world and then turn around to attack them.

On his way up to his quarters he was met by a Malin, She had a woman with her. It was Tova.

Malin met him with a smile and he gave her one in return. "I have someone here who wants to help. She came when they attack the last time" "If she wants to help she can help guard the man we just detained." Tova was surprised to be given such an important job so early but her kind appearance always made people think the best of her. Before they could talk more he had left them. The two women looked at each other and smiled.

When Tova had heard about the child she volunteered herself. She had built up a fast friendship with Malin. It wasn't her expectation that they would give her a task with such importance. It showed her how being in the right place at the right could make a difference.

Tova entered the room, the man was sitting on an old used couch. The couch didn't have any legs on it which left the man sitting in an uncomfortably close to the ground. He was handcuffed to a nearby radiator. She observed the man greatly, could this truly be man that Johanna had told her about. She moved around him, looking down on him. "How did you find it?" "Your leader already asked my that" He couldn't help but to feel smitten by the woman, she had beautiful eyes that could leave anyone in a trance. "He is not my leader, Johanna is" He looked up. "How she know i was here?" "She didn't, I did. I was expecting your arrival when I had to flee the infected birch people. when the rumour spread that they managed to capture a birch child I knew who you were." She helped Stefan remove the handcuff. "I sure am happy that I found you madame" "Please, you can call me Tova" "That's a beautiful name" A shy involuntarily smile came out. "Are you hurt?" "No, We need to find the child as soon as possible, we were separated by the loonies, how did you get in here?" "Actually... I'm the guard" Stefan burst out laughing "That can't be true, how did you even... Are you one of them?" "Absolutely not, The barricade seems to keep the creatures out for some reason, the police don't seem to have the resoures to handle all the attacks but Uno manage to unify them, Although I'm not sure I trust him either." she said.. "Me neither, we need to leave immediately or I'm not sure what they do if they find us" "My laboratory isn't that far from hear but we need to get past the creatures" Stefan diid the little he could to clean himself up. He approaced the second door. He was just about to open the door.

He turned around and looked around the room to see if there was anything that he could use as weapon. There was an old wooden plank. He picked it up and felt the structure of the wood. It was heavy but not to heavy. It was dry and could easily leave a splinter. He looke at Tova. She noded.

The guard in the other room was not prepared for what was coming for him. His world went black as the plank hit his head.

Stefan rushed over to the child to make sure it was alright. The fence was looked. Tova ran up to the guard and searched his keys, She felt bad. She had never hurt anyone before, not like this. The keys felt like old iro due to their size and old design.

Stefan opened the fence.

The Birch child stood up after being forced to sit down in such an unnatural position. Being forced to stay in a crude cage filled the creature with anxiety and stress. The birch child wasn't sure what to think about these giant creatures although it did recognise Stefans face. He didn't show any other emotions beside his willingness to follow Stefan.

Stefan grabbed the hand of the birch child. "You're safe now, You didn't think I would let anything happen to you, did you?" He smiled at the creature who stared back with those innocent eyes, they twitched ever so slightly He was reminded of Sofia, The creature was just as innocent as she was.

When Tova saw the child she ran up to it ecstatically. She put her hand on the child's cheeks and stared straight in the creature's eyes. She felt its head, measured its arms and felt its structure. The birch child started feeling uncomfortable even though the woman was surprisingly friendly. "Okey, Leave the child alone now, the poor thing has been through enough" "I'm sorry it's just so interesting" Stefan wasn't sure when he had ever seen someone stare at something with such intensity. "We have another problem" he said. "What?", "How are we going to get out of here without being noticed?" "Don't forget that we need to get past those infected birch people". Tova took a moment to think, She still had a little bit of believability but the birch child was going to be hard to hide. The shopping center had manual pallet movers spread around in most of the storage units and shipping hangers. She figured that if she could get ahold of one of them it would be possible for her to hide the two inside. She would also need a way to escape the infected birch creatures. Finding a car would be easy but finding one that worked was going to be more difficult. "Wait here, make sure you lock up the guard before he wakes up." "What are you going to do?", "Trust me". He had too, he had no other choice, She did free him after all, that tended to give a person the benefit of the doubt.

Uno was walking front and back in his quarters frantically. The place was an old store that used to sell clothes, pillows and other delightful products. The place had been decorated for Uno's personal comfort and life style. There was graffiti on the walls and he had built a chamber of black and red textiles hanging in the store's front window hiding anyone from going inside the store. The shopping center was several stories large and you could see through most of the shopping center from the top floor.

Every turn he made he would stop and look out at his small kingdom. There were constant movements. People were running and stocking up on food, resources and burnable material. The people had naturally organized themselves by what they were best at. The fear of creatures had made them into productive workers. Uno had loads of lighters, plastic bottles and gasoline tanks, He said they were for preparation in case the creatures made it inside but the real reason behind these supplies were to soothe the withdrawal of his other addictions. He would huff the gas and burn the plastic that he would later inhale. He would do anything he could in order to make himself get that feeling of self-hurt.

He stepped out near the glass fence on the top floor. He stretched out his body and grabbed the fence with his hands, everything to feel more powerful. "The rumors are true!"

The entire workforce stopped or slowed down, they turned their heads to look at him. "We have found the child of a birch person, and yes it is a blessing. All of our hard work has led us to this. When we work together to actually make a difference, when we work towards a goal, we succeed. But we must be aware, losing the sight of the true goal will be the reason of our demise" Uno's voice echoed through the shopping center.

Tova was wearing a dark cap and slim jacket. She was dragging the pallet with the mover. She could hear Uno's speech all the way to the bottom floor of the. "...And it is we who shall save the world when the sand of time suffocate us and show us our true creed...". Stefan

and the birch child were hidden in the pallet box. He felt an anxiousness that reminded him of when he first saw the birch people. "...There is no justice. We are born only to be aware of our own death, is that ethical? Is that destiny? No! it's self neglect. We have been greedy and we have prioritised useless gadgets and trinkets for what...."

Tova managed to slip by most of the crowd that were occupied by the speech. At the exit there was a man with a black vest sprayed with reflex paint. He looked at her and she smiled in return. The man didn't say a thing. He looked at her, Her sweet innocent beauty had another feature, it made some men afraid of her. The man stared her straight in her eyes for slightly to long. She exited as soon as possible and shut the door as fast as she could.

The outside was lit up by the walls of fire encircling the center of the town. The fires illuminated the falling snow. The fires were burning heavy.

Uno had his arms stretched in a religious gesture. "...And we my children are...". Unos world went black as a strong metal object hit him in the head. He felt a warm feeling where the wound had been and a wet cold liquid flowing from his head. He could feel that he had fallen on his knees and tried to navigate by the feeling of the floor. the fear of being blinded triumphed the fear of the assailant. He tried crawling away from the perp. He felt his body getting heavier and he could hear the noise of foot steps coming for him. There was a peace.

When he woke up the only thing he could see was a red blood net and a white bolt in the lining of his eyes, The image had seemed to be stuck, no matter which way he turned the image was everywhere. He was terrified that the image had gotten stuck inside his eyes, and would never disappear, He started breathing more heavily at the anxious thought of having permanent eye damage. He would have easily taken death over this. "Who are you! Who did this!" "I'm sorry, I didn't want to do it but you let one of those things inside the only place where we are safe from them." He could clearly tell whose voice it was, The beautiful Malin, the misguided one he thought to himself. "Please..." Tears were falling from his eyes "Malin, You don't don't understand, they are not evil, there is no evil" "You let these creatures, these evil creatures, inside. You are talking crazy and you are not a leader, you're just a dirty druggie"

He could tell that they had taken him to his quarters. He involuntarily started picturing all the routes he could flee, where he would find the closest chair, chain, hammer, pipe or gas tank. He could tell from the noise that there were more than one person in the room.

"You call me a dirty druggie, but you are just a fucking child murderer!" He quickly grabbed a nearby chain and swung it with full force at her. She screamed and fell over on the ground. He quickly headed straight for the door. He could hear that there were people running after him. He hit the glass railing and with the last bit of force he had, he threw himself off the railing and off the top floor of the shopping center.

Tova dragged the pallet box through the thin layer of snow, The pallet mover wasn't adjusted for outdoor use, the wheels were slow and it was hard to pull it. There were some people outside the shopping center, they looked at her but no one confronted her. They would naturally assume that the box was filled with logs or material for the construction of the barricade. There were many choices of roads but she did remember that there was on particular place where they would be certain to be able to hide from the birch people. down the road next to an old parking lot there used to be a small harbour. The harbour had been used for restaurant boats and sauna rafts for rent. Tova could remember how she always wanted to rent that sauna and go with some girl friends. She hadn't been the kind of

The birch people

person to go on such adventurous but she had always wished that she would have been. She knew however that she had more important things to do. The harbour would go from concrete to a steep 8 feet drop. During this time of year there were rocks at the base of the drop then followed by the sea. They figured that they could go where the burning barricade met the ocean and sneak out before anyone noticed.

She stopped by the edge of the barricade. She made sure there was no one around before she knocked three times on the pallet box.

Stefan lifted the top of from within. It was large and surprisingly heavier than it looked. It fell on the ground with a loud noise that made the birch child twitch. Tova stretched out the hand to the child and smiled at the nervous creature. It looked back at her. Tova was a woman of patience. The child eventually grabbed her hand and got up. She guided it out of the box. Stefan pushed the pallet mover with the box to the edge by running it outside of the edge of the harbour. There wasn't a loud splash, only a muffled crash as the ensemble hit the rocks.

Stefan moved closer towards the edge and tried to climb down on the rocks. He felt disoriented at the distance of the rocks. The edge was concrete but had been sanded many times which left a rough feeling on his hand as he climbed down. The jump down on the rocks would hurt him more than he expected. The angles of the rocks made his foot take all the weight in a bad way which sent a wave of shock through his entire leg. He didn't yell, He kept strong. He quickly stepped back up and stretched out his hand so that he could catch the child. The birch child tried backing away at first but Tova nudged the creature to take the leap down. Once the child had gotten off the harbour it was only Tova left. She sat down towards the edge, turned around and started climbing down. As she was about to make the final climb down she stopped herself. Stefan whispered to her "What are you doing? We gotta hurry up" "I thought I heard something". She looked out at the smoke rising from the barricade. Staring into the smoke rising and swaying in the dark sky there was something moving. It was hard for her to tell if it was smoke or if it was something else. The wood was crackling and hissing but there was an undertone that didn't follow the rest of the fire. The noise seemed to become louder and closer. She quickly jumped down where Stefan would help make sure that she landed smoothly. She quickly turned to him and showed that he needed to cover his mouth.

Stefan could hear it too, there were many footprints on the other side of the fence. They quietly sneaked on the rocks, The waves hit the rocks disguising their movements. Stefan could feel his entire chest pounding as he realised what those creatures were capable of doing, The way that they would desecrate their corpses after their deaths just like they had done to his sweet Sofia, she didn't deserve such a fate. Neither did this woman, He came to wonder why she would take such a risk to help them, was it just curiosity for her or was it something else.

They moved slowly along the rocks, making sure that not to make a sound. The rocks had fragments of seaweed and beer bottle stuck between them. There was the smell of rotten fish and the occasional tree branch. They had passed where the barricade ended and they were fully in unprotected space. They could see what was hiding on the other side of the harbour wall but they could sense it was instant death. The birch was slow and clumsy. It stopped half way. Tova stretched out her hand again patiently but behind her mask she had never felt as frustrated. Her calm appearance wasn't enough and it wasn't until Stefan walked behind the child and put his hand on the creature's shoulders that it got the confidence to move forward. The thought that this child didn't have anyone to protect it and no way for it to survive made Stefan feel like his entire body went heavy. He felt sorry for

the creature, it had nothing after all. He felt more compassion for the child than he let on. Tova could see him caring for the child and felt rather warm when he saw Stefan be so gentle with the child.

The further along they went eventually the rocks disappeared as the water became deeper. The option of climbing on the harbour again was impossible. The hoard would catch up to them no matter how far they ran, and even if they split up there would be enough of them to go after them all.

"We need to go down into the water" He whisper to her. She looked at the birch child, wondering whether or not it would be able to swim or if its skin would take any damage. She wasn't a fan of trying things in a non laboratory setting however she was morally cornered. She gave a nod him indicating that she was willing to do it, truthfully she felt horrified at stepping into the dark cold water. She had always had a great respect for the ocean. The first step into the water was like a mental shock. It felt as the entire sea was swallowing her and she just let it. She tried to give herself a moment to prepare herself to go deeper into the sea but before she could decide the ocean decided for her as a large wave swallowed her entire leg. She managed to hold on to the edge. Once she had managed to make it into the water it was up to Stefan to help the birch child. It clearly didn't to go into the water. He had to force it. He embraced the child in a warm hug. The hug quickly turned into him lifting it and walking into the ocean on the edge of what had been a harbour but was now more of the side of a bridge. It was cold, almost pitch black and snowing. They could see the snow falling into the sea but they could feel the snow falling. As they swam Stefan and Tova both could feel their hearts pumping abnormally fast. Stefan had to hold the birch child as to prevent it from sinking. It was heavier in water than he had expected considering how dry the creature's bark had felt. The idea that a creature made from wood would be heavy was an unexpected contrast he hadn't expected.

They swam for a while.

After having passed the other end of the town in the cold water Tova had started losing all the strength in her body. The only thing driving her forward was the fear and determination. They were going to make it, there was nothing that was going to stop them. Tova had one and only one goal in sight. Make it to the other side. Survive. Her every instinct was to live.

When they had followed the shoreline all the way to the other side of the town, where the industrial area began, they were frozen. Stefan had lost all feeling in his toes and all of Tova was shaking. The birch child showed no symptoms of hypothermia but the water had left a pattern all the way up to the creature's neck.

Stefan took off his shirt and trousers but left his boxers on. Tova did the same. Their wet clothes did more damage than good. They ran up the ditch on to the road. There was an old sporting goods store. Carefully analyzing every part of the area for the slightest movement. He knew that their only chance of survival was not being caught by the creatures. Now he would even prefer the loonies than these creatures. There was a second of doubt but his pragmatic side took over, There was no point in regretting his actions thus far. He was here and he was cold. Stefan crouched over to a car by the sporting goods store. Tova and the birch child followed him. He grabbed the handle of the car and to their luck it was opened. He searched everywhere for something to warm to wear. The only thing he found of value was a rim cross.

"You're gonna need to stay here with the birch child" "No, We'll go with you" "No, You and the child are more important than me, if I die, there is still hope, but without you and him we're

all lost.” She rejectingly agreed. Playing a maiden in distress wasn’t something that fit her well, but being too important to waste was something she was used to.

He ran up to the door of the sporting goods store, looked around him, Smash. He kept on smashing the door again and again. It barely made a mark. He started panicking and started hitting it harder with the rim cross. Every hit louder and harder. His heart was racing. He managed to get a hole large enough for him to shove his hand through and unlock the door.

He held the door open and gave Tova a signal. She crouched and hastened towards the door. They ran through the opening. Stefan scouted the outside on last time before closing the door behind them.

Uno tried picking himself off the floor. His legs felt as if every ounce of blood had been drained. He managed to get up on his knees and with every bit of strength he managed to get up. The adrenaline helped numb his pain. He looked around but the only thing he could see was a small tunnel that made it through the dark, red and white in his eyes. He wobbled to the closest wall to lean on. There was blood falling down from the back of his head. There was blood dripping from his arms but he couldn’t see it. The blood dripping on his arms would go as far down as his elbows before it would drip off. As the drops of blood gathered and fell on his elbows there was a strange pain he couldn’t explain.

He pushed himself towards the door. He knew it well enough to navigate despite having only a small tunnel of vision to go by. The shopping center had been his kingdom and he had studied it well. He pushed on the door almost falling out of the building.

The bystanders saw Uno almost come falling through the door. He had a strong limp as he was forcing his way as far away as possible. They couldn’t do anything but watch as their leaders walked away. The people who didn’t have any interest didn’t want to get hurt by the opposition nor were they so moved by his message that they would feel a need to help him now that he was in his weakest moments. Some felt loyal towards him to catch him. The air was cold and fresh. The place had clearly been built for more people than they were. The streets were long and wide to allow heavier flows of people. He walked towards the sea, he knew he didn’t have a lot of time. He thought about all the people he wronged in life despite what he had done he didn’t think he deserved what was happening. He had tried to help people for the first time in his life and it had ended in complete chaos. Perhaps the trees hadn’t given him an answer. Perhaps they had tricked him. He hated Malin for what she had done. He didn’t forgive. He didn’t forget.

He could hear the subtle waves of the ocean hitting rocks. He could barely tell where the harbour ended and the ocean started.

Whilst trying to walk as fast as he could suddenly feel the world disappearing beneath him. It was the edge that had proven its appearance by rudely disappearing.

Uno fell crashing into the cold water. The cold came as a shock to him yet he likewise expected it to feel colder. He flipped over as to face the dark sky, and nothing but a small hue of light in the sky from the fires. There was a moment of relief as he knew that he was going to finally get the peace he truly had wanted. To not be driven to live by abstinence or fear. He deserved it. A blanket of warmth covered him. He became so warm floating in the dark, drifting in a sea without end. He thought about his parents, his siblings. Had they survived the attacks or were they still living and fighting against the creatures. It didn’t matter, he took the time to appreciate everyone he had the pleasure of meeting, even Malin or anyone else that had wronged him. He drifted out of consciousness until there was nothing left of his being and the memories he had kept.

Malin and her crew had managed to make it down just in time to watch Uno fall into the dark ocean. Just as he was about to fall a part of her felt like shouting for him to stop but nothing came out. The feelings she felt was complex, at one point he had been the answer to all her worries and fears and now she was on her own. Her hatred for the infected birch people had subdued only for a moment for her to regret her actions. It was a bad feeling and not a victory.

The sporting goods store was dark, the owners had most likely fled the city only a few days before. Most of the things they sold were overpriced brand items like exercise shirts, water bottles and sports equipment. They were walking through the store, Stefan in and Tove went separate ways trying to find any dry warm clothes. Half naked Stefan went grabbed a pair of socks from a bowl of brand new sporting socks with extra grip. He grabbed a shirt straight from the store sample and put it on. Tova saw a pair leggings that she put on. There were a sport jacket. They kept walking around the store to find different things too put on. They kept a loose eye on the birch child who was prying and poking at everything it saw.

The creature could smell the plastic from freshly printed rubber and silicone. The air was fresh and the store had large surfaces. The child put a hand and lightly stroked the basketball as it moved through the section. It picked up the ball.

The birch child dropped the ball and it started bouncing until it started running off. It followed the ball down to a section with a long board that had been put on to display. It stopped in front of it and looked at it. It quickly lost attention and looked up at the different clubs and helmets. The helmets were of all kinds of colours and sizes.

Stefan looked over when he heard the basketball fall on the floor but when he saw that it was only the birch child he quickly stopped paying attention. There were several different brands of backpacks, he wasn't sure which would be most practical. He picked a small one that was medium size. He knew it would be more important to be fast than to stock up on items at this point. If they got trapped by one of those things and they had to flee or if they had to hide quickly it would be more important to be practical. He went over to the water bottles. Tova was standing there as well. "That one looks pretty, is it the one you like?" "I care more about that one on the left" They caught eye contact. "How are you feeling?" "I feel very tired, and angry but most of all worried that all of this is wasted, you?" "I'm sorry, I'm worried too. I also feel sorry for that little buddy over there" He pointed at the birch child who was playing with six tennis balls that it had poured all over the floor. "Yeah that thing was born into a strange world, guess the future belongs to it now" "I'm not sure about that. I think those rotten ones want to kill him. Not sure why. Maybe it has something to do with the yeast", "What yeast?" "Johanna told me that those creatures got infected with some kind of bacteria that could change its own genetics to such an extent that it becomes into a yeast that takes over its hosts" "Wait what? The bacteria I found does that? That explains so much why it was so difficult to do a proper genome sequencing. I shouldn't have trusted an external supplier." "I just know what Johanna told me" "I'm sorry, I know. I'm just tired and hungry" "When did you last eat?" "I will admit it has been a while" She thought that his attentiveness was attractive and it made her feel like she mattered to him. Perhaps this was a man who knew how to behave towards a woman, something which was very rare, even before the attacks. Their eye contact had gone on for slightly longer than Stefan was comfortable with. He shied away. "I'll see if I can find something." He went to the back of the store and opened one of the staff doors. He looked around in the hopes of finding a purple hue of some sort. Since the MSEK system was implemented some companies had to grow food on the side to pay their employees MSEK so that they could afford food. There wasn't

The birch people

any purple lights but instead he a small storage of plastic boxes. Just his luck. The boxes were big and heavy and had been stored in a dark place. Mushrooms, loads and loads of mushrooms. at least three different kinds. He also found some french fries in the fridge.

Tova and the birch child were sitting in the employee kitchen. It smelled absolutely delightful. Stefan was a natural cook. Tova took the time too examine the birch child more closely She figured that the birch child took it nutrients from the water it suckked upp naturally. She had filled a bucket of water and added some mulch that the mushrooms had been in. It wasn't enough but it was the best they could do in the place. At her laboratory she could create a nutrient supplement specifically design to benefit the creature but over here there was nothing she could do.

The first taste from the mushroom and french fry mix made -tova forget all her troubles. The food was so tasty she couldn't remember the last time she had anything so tasty. Stefans home cooking were leagues above that of the young researcher. What she had gained in entrepreneurship and bioengineering she had lost in cooking skills. To her the trade off seemed reasonable. And for moments like these she only appreciated the food even more. Life goes in waves and this was a definite peak. She had wondered when the universe would show its appreciation for all the suffering they had endured. She thought that this small moment of peace wasn't enough, but she would take whatever she could get.

They had finished eating and filled their backpacks with food and water. It was uncertain if the situation would ever stabilize. It was clear that there wouldn't be any food deliveries for a long time and even iif they were they would most certainly be late. Stefan felt pride that his country had absorbed the new economic system. It was time like these that he loved his government for always thinking ahead. There was not a single person in the country who wouldn't be able to grow their own food or had the skills needed to refine their skills in a way that would benefit them.

When the system came in to place they had not known what kind of crisis would come but they knew that there would eventually be a crisis, because there always is, and always will be a crisis. The larger benefit of this currency system is that it allowed people to grow as people and also made people more interested in learning all new kinds of skills that were important. The system had at first been difficult to implement and the economy went down at first but in the long run it would benefit the entire country's economy. It ha Inspired people to question their own dogma in money and made them see how it wasn't as important to horde up on resources when the only thing they actually needed was food. And services was something that one can easily always do for others.

The biggest problem with such a great economic shift was the strength of the institutions that were responsible putting the system in place. The reform had to be slow and gently nudged until it would be ready to be put into place in different small steps followed by a close monitoring of the system. It had been beautifully done. The system had been implemented and controlled by an independent committee of professors. There had been debates and everyone had the opportunity to voice their concerns. Despite the differennce of opinion they had done their best to protect the interest of as many people as possible.

Stefan sometimes felt proud for just being who he was and coming from the place he came from. It made him feel special when he heard about how great the Swedish IT industry was going despite him actually not contributing that much for it.

The birch people

The sporting goods store had surprisingly a lot of practical things that they could use. Headlamps from the cave climbing section and strong footwear for every type of weather. They had filled their backpacks with important things.

Stefan stuck his head out to get a good view of the streets without getting seen by anything lurking in the area. He saw the route they had to go. They ran left until they ran out of wall to hide behind. Tova held the hand of the birch child with a strong grip and pulled it as she ran so the creature wouldn't want to stop unexpectedly. She didn't like being so strict but this time she had to despite the creature's protests.

Stefan ran and took a peak around the corner. There were no infected birch creatures. They ran to the next building across the street. They ran in unison to avoid that one of them would be left behind. On the other side they kept running until they got to the next corner. The road up in front had a lot of empty space which would leave them exposed in case a hoard would suddenly appear.

As they ran from building to building, sneaking and crouching Tova felt uncertain if their strategy was the best. If the creatures would get a glance at them they would instantly outrun them. The creatures could easily tear down any door or crush any window. Perhaps they would even be able to break the walls of the building. Even though they looked like big people their wooden composition made them stronger and heavier than any person would be even at that size. There had to be a better way of travelling. The scene was eerie. There were vast open spaces with roads that otherwise would be full of cars, now empty. The lights on the road still functioned as they were driven by the town's solargrid that had been automated.

They were getting closer to Tova's Office. She started to feel hope towards the future. The Birch people had come from almost nowhere and despite the discovery of the infectious bacteria there had to be a reason for them to appear in what seemed to be pure nothingness.

The road was long and wide with two lanes on each side. There were clear signs that the birch people had been in the area since there were pools of blood in different colouring the white snow. The blood was recently fresh as it had a bright and red colour. "If we move next to the mountain we will be able to hide easier" "No, that's where they came from the first time. There had to be some other way" "We do always have the option to use the walkways, they sporadically lead underneath the roads on certain sides. We could probably hide there to some extent. There is always the possibility to run and hide in the drainage systems that run into the ditches, we could in theory crawl in the ditch, at least we could spot them in time." "I think the walkways would be most practical". The birch child stood and stared at the two of them. "The creature was naturally camouflaged with its white body and black stripes. The creature seemed worried. It started nudging and dragging on Stefan's coat.

He looked at the creature and tried telling why the creature was so distressed. "Tova, We need to hide now". She went from reason to fear, the part of her that wanted to live took over and she grabbed the hand of the birch child and ran towards the nearest ditch. Stefan followed quickly behind as they ran towards the drainage system. It was small but they would be able to squish their way in. Tova went first followed by the birch child. Stefan who was the biggest chose to go last since he preferred the easiest exit, before he entered he wanted to get a quick scope of where they were coming from. He pulled out a set of binoculars that he had stolen from the sporting goods store.

The creatures at a distance didn't look anything like the original infected birch people. They had skin. It looked soggy and wrinkly. It looked as if they had taken the skin from people and put it on like clothes. They stretched into the sags of human skin were if one part hadn't fit

The birch people

right they had just put on another one. The sight took him some time to melt. They stole people skin now? Why? Was it for nutrients or was it just to humiliate them even further.

Both Tova and the birch child had managed to go deep into the drainage pipe. It was Stefan's turn. He backed his way inside because he wanted to be able to see a little bit of what was happening on the outside. They waited. The pipe was dark and cold. The wet snow had left some instances of water that hadn't frozen yet which made it even more difficult to isolate. The clothes they had were however high grade quality items that managed to keep the two of them cold. Tova who was furthest in had the most difficult to wait. The worst part was not knowing how long it would take for them to leave. After about an hour they started hearing a strange sound above them. The creatures were straight above them. They walked slowly.

Hidden in a drainage pipe with barely any space to move had a psychological effect on Tova. Stefan could feel their movements up above. One of the creatures walked past the drainage system and Stefan saw the creature's legs walk past. It hadn't noticed them. He was prepared for one of them lowering their heads, and staring straight into the pipe and grabbing him. They didn't. The fear was overwhelming. The snow slowly falling gave him a sense of calm that he couldn't hide from. It was as if the world was going in slow motion as the snow fell. The longer they waited, the more snow would cover the entrance of their drainage pipe. After another hour Stefan started getting tired and began slowly falling asleep.

"Hey... Heeeeey. Wake up now" it was Tova who was shouting from back in the drainage pipe. Stefan woke up. The entrance was nearly covered by snow. Being cramped in the tight area was surprisingly warm. He was surprised at the efficiency of the clothes they had stolen from the store. Stefan had never been the kind of person to buy clothes from those kinds of stores, they were often way too expensive and he knew that what they were actually paying wasn't the product itself, but rather just the brand.

He shuffled away the snow. It was glowing bright from the sun. Before he dared going all the way out he made sure to look in every direction to make sure that there weren't any of them still around.

The birch child followed him out the pipe, last came Tova who had been stuck in the deeper section of the pipe.

The entire area was glowing white. All the blood had been snowed over. There were tracks in the snow that had been snowed over. The bumps looked like they were sinking into the ground. The infected birch creature walked without bending their knees too much which resulted in their tracks being long and leaving a line where they had walked. Despite the creatures still being around it felt more secure. Tova took the time to really look around and appreciate every minute she still had on this earth.

Johanna was sitting in a mountain facility that had been used as a base of operations for some of the more influential people in the biotechnology and security sector. The meeting had been arranged by the government as there was clearly a lot they had to benefit from the different companies. There was one person however who had been especially popular, a man who tried hiding away from all the attention by occupying an entire conference room for himself. Tony had been short-listed to be in the meeting since the company he managed had such an important standing with Unity Biotech corporation. Despite not actually being that involved he had found himself in a position of great power. Even though Tony had always been a man who strived for success he was not comfortable with this kind of success.

The birch people

just being dropped in his knee. He preferred to earn his success even though he wouldn't mind a short cut every once in a while. The conference rooms were practical and designed for the bare minimum of comfort. There were screens with maps everywhere. They had managed to under a very short amount of time create a map over where the attack had occurred. It wasn't reliable and it only focused on Sweden but it helped give the people in the room a definition of the scope of the attacks. The main focus now was to get more information and prevent as much damage as possible. The biggest danger with the infected creatures had not been their strength. If they had been confronted with a military unit with the right equipment they could be easily destroyed. The big danger had come from ability to show up from nowhere and the numbers which they produced. It was completely draining as the government was forced to send out all of their troops at the same time as the creatures had interrupted supply lines and logistic chains. It was like fighting a guerilla war where the enemies had infinite troops.

The news about the birch child had been a hot topic of conversation. Most people had by then agreed that there had to be a change in tactics and there were some that hoped that the study of the child would result in new insight which would lead to new opportunities.

Johanna was dying on the inside to get news from Tova and Stefan. They had heard of the attack and were preparing to send troops out however the bad weather pattern and lack of resources put a cog in their wheels. Another problem was that the people in that room had other things they wanted to protect. Johanna also had people she cared about but she knew they were safe.

One of the operating chiefs in the room came yelling into the room. There had been another attack at a hospital. Someone else in the room helped send resources and made sure that the hospital would get military resources. Johanna and Tony really wanted to help Tova and Stefan but everytime they thought they were going to get resources diverted to their cause they were sidestepped by another great incident. The situation was escalating and whenever they thought that things were going to slow down they would spiral out of control.

The sun was shining that day. She wasn't sure that she had deserved it, not after what she had done. All the things she had done. She wondered what it had been that had turned her into such a bad person. She slept in a grand bed that had been taken from the home and textile department. It had originally been used to display pillow casings. As she would gently wake up she started going through a checklist in her mind about what they needed to get done first in order to create security for them as a group. She knew that there were still people loyal to Uno. She had to make sure that those voices were suppressed or outnumbered. The key to their success would be their safety and stability. There was a man that knocked on the entrance.

"We cannot find the birch child anywhere, not the man who brought it here" "What, are you sure" "Yes, it seems they knocked out the guard" "They?" "We think Tova betrayed you" "What? When did this happen, how far have they gotten!?" "We don't know yet" "You may leave". She made a hand gesture.

This was an absolute disaster, they should have waited with the coup d'etat one more day and then they could have blamed this failure on Uno. Their only choice would be to shut down all rumors. Their main concern would need to be stability and security.

She got dressed. and headed down to the main floor. She took notice at the different looks that people were giving her. They had not looked at her like that before. Some with fear, some with loathing and some with support. It was

The birch people

difficult for her to guess what they thought about her. She knew that she now had to be careful of who she trusted. She went outside of the shopping center to look at the fire. It had been greatly reduced. They had slowly ran out of wood.

As she stared into the flames she realised that she had to do something more drastic in order to ensure their survival. They needed equipment, weapons and supplies.

She ordered one of her men to assemble a task force responsible for raiding all nearby old Swedish supply centers that had been around ever since the 70's. It felt strange that this hadn't been one of Uno's first actions, then again he had never been a strong leader.

Tova was standing outside her office with Stefan and the birch child. Quiet and empty, the light was still on and it was still warm inside. She now felt under complete control of her surroundings. She looked at Stefan with a smile. He could tell that she was feeling more at home. She could finally make an agar culture with special nutrients that she could feed to the creature. Stefan changed his entire opinion of her when he saw the place. The glass walls, the books, the vials, tubes and chemicals. He realised that he had underestimated her. He knew she was smart but he never expected her to be this organised and having so many cool things he couldn't even imagine all the knowledge she had.

Before she started any heavy work she would first make sure to tend to her plants. She needed to make sure that they had a steady source of food supply. She had no idea how long it would take before they could leave again without getting attacked by those creatures.

She still had access to the internet. It was one of the few things the creatures had not affected although she could be sure for how long the government would be able to maintain the internet.

The birch child sat with its legs in a bucket full of agar that she had made herself. It was surprisingly well made considering the circumstances. She asked Stefan if he could break into any of the nearby offices and get a mattress or anything that they could sleep on.

Stefan left the building with the birch child in the safe hands of Tova. She had prepared several tests she needed to do on the creature.

Tony was sitting in the conference hall with nothing else but his laptop and a room full of overworked experts. They had diverted a lot of their resources south. It wasn't unusual considering that the southern part of Sweden has always stolen resources from the northern areas. It wasn't just Stockholm, it was the entire European Union that depended on iron mines in the northern area of the country. The people of the northland had never seen the reward for it. They would argue that they made jobs in the area but the truth is that most people that went there to work came from the south. The local population had gained nothing and only been taken advantage of as the central government pushed down their culture in order to stop them from being able to protest. This wasn't the time to feel angry, after all this was a crisis.

The infected birch people had switched their strategy to now appearing at random places without any logical reason. There was a lack of hope in the region.

Tony had a growing head ache that would seem to end. He took a painkiller that he had saved for this occasion. It was hard to swallow but the cold water managed to make it go down. He read his email. There was a new email titled "Urgent!". He opened it. The sender was Tova. There was a PDF file attached in the document. As he was reading through the document it took a while to truly understand what he was reading. He slowly started to understand what he was reading. The birch child was immune to the bacteria.

Stefan was inside the office of the next door building. It was a legal practice. He had broken in to the place in order to find supplies. He was however deeply disappointed at the lack of supplies they had. The place did however have a bed. In Sweden some companies have a bed for employees who might need it for a day or so. He grabbed the bed and dragged it out of the office. It wasn't easy, the more so when he got out in the cold. He was just happy that there wasn't any infected birch creatures out there at the time. When he managed to get the bed in the office. He stacked it next to one of the walls. He was surprised to see Tova's happy face run towards him. They kissed. He didn't know how to react as he wasn't sure as to what had exactly happened. "It has a naturally occurring bacterial resistance!" "uh.. what?" he replied "I tested one of my cell samples of the infected birch trees and compared it to the birch child. It has a natural defense! This means that there is hope!" He wasn't sure whether or not he was happier about the result or if he was happier about the kiss. He looked her in the eyes and leaned down to kiss her again. Her lips had a sweet taste to them. They closed their eyes. and kept kissing.

The news of the birch creatures alleged immunity sent ripple cords through the operation room. Despite the news being well received a lot of the men and women in the room made sure not to celebrate too soon. They all looked at Johanna for answers. She couldn't give them any answers. The news which Tony had blurted out had created hope but some of the more strategy minded people in the room knew that it meant that there would need to be an allocation of resources. The economic situation had made everything a lot more difficult. As people had fled the cities and abandoned their workplaces the result meant that a lot of the resources they had couldn't be used. The railroads were still operational but using them would be a big hassle since the rails themselves were covered with snow and there was no one that could help them. As the operational management had discussed the usefulness of the immunity the task of allocating resources would be a lot more difficult than they had originally planned. Johanna had asked Tony for a private meeting.

"I want to make one thing clear. All the work made by Tova is owned by me" Tony took a second to consider his answer. He knew the agreement she had signed well enough to realise that the consequences would prove to be difficult to get out of. The problem with the rule of law is that it has always been patient. even though the situation right now meant he could probably ignore her but when everything had passed the consequences could last decades. But there was leverage for negotiations. He had the advantage of being the decider whether he thought she was right or not. Tony had always been a good negotiator, the reason why he had been entrusted with the company. Tova knew that there was no one greater at negotiating than him. "The agreement you signed required that the work she made made for you would be owned by you. You own the result that she has produced. However now I assume that you want her to do something with that result, Am I correct? And in which case I think that we should have a greater discussion about how we go forward, would that be okay with you?" At first he had doubted Tova for getting herself involved with Cell line prep work but now she had managed to get him in this position, he was actually impressed.

"If we are going to create a vaccine we are going to need more pay for the work, we also want a small cut in the profits for the vaccine" "I would prefer a fixed amount, Remember that we already have an agreement and if I need to I will press on that" "Johanna, you are in a difficult position, You don't have access to your resources. You will benefit from an agreement where we also earn money for your success. Not only will we guarantee that the work will get done but we will work actively to find potential partners for you. We will help you get the contracts you need. We will include a strong loyalty clause to the agreement

The birch people

where you will be the absolute most active partner. And for you personally There is the possibility that we would feel so grateful that stocks in our company would find themselves in your possession. ” Tony knew how to sprinkle the sunday. “If that were to happen the deal would be more interesting.” “I can help you get a privatised military deal that could make you very wealthy, remember that this is worldwide, every country in the world could benefit from this” “Tony, If you draw up the paperwork I would be very interested in signing the deal”

Tova received an email from Tony. The deal was that she would prepare a vaccine. She would reply that it was impossible to create a vaccine for the yeast. It was typical. He had worked for a biotech company for over ten years, he should have learnt some biology by now, at least enough to know that vaccines were for the immune system. She annoyingly replied that what he actually wanted her to create was a solution containing a bacteria that could kill of the yeast and would even spread from host to host. As usual he wouldn't know a thing about what she talked about. It was infuriating at times but his job wasn't to understand the science of it all, it was to create deals and maintain her vision of the company.

Despite their disagreements the company had become like a family and she was happy knowing that he was alive. Despite thinking that Tony was absolutely hopeless when it came to science there was a part of here that admired his strategy in life. He had worked very hard to become successfull but shhe thought that in the end his reasons for working so hard wasn't worth it. If you were going to work yourself to death why not make sure it was for something that actually mattered, but maybe this was his way of doing that.

She had designed a couple of different plasmids see needed to order. The difficulty laid in getting the plasmids delivered. Odds were that the company had stopped production. She called up Tony. She needed help for her to bee able to finish the work. He agreed that he would do anything he could to help her. Beside her daily tasks she could nothing else than prepare for what they would do next.

Stefan had gone out for supplies. Tova had asked him to find carbon dioxide for an incubator she needed to grow certain cells. She told him that the tubes could be any size. He figured that he could just search any local supermarket. The time alone had left him given him a moment to reflect on the loss of his girlfriend who he loved so much. He wondered what had happened to her parents. It felt disrespectful to move on. there was something that was piercing at his conscience. He was raising a creature that came from her cadaver. He had loved her in a way that was complicated. Sometimes it was as if he cared more about her then himself, at other times she was just too much. There were moments when she was so sweet and other moments when she could be so bitter.

He smashed the window of the store. looked around to make sure that there weern't any of the creatures around. When he went inside he was surprised that the store was relatively well supplied. He grabbed a shopping cart, the wheels were to noisy. He looked down at the wheels realising that the wheels would be to easy to hear if any of the creatures where to close by. He heard the noise of car. He wondered where the people could be coming from and where they were going but he knew he would never be able to catch up them. He looked around the store and grabbed a black plastic bag. He went over to the frozen food section and filled the bag as much as he could. The weather was cold and it was only going to get colder so he wouldn't need to bother about refrigeration. He went to the cashier section of the store. He looked around and managed to find a box containing the tubes of the much needed carbon dioxide. He wasn't sure how she would be able to adjust them for the incubator but he knew that she was a very creative and intelligent person. She was pretty

and he actually felt happy that he found her but he couldn't shake that he felt bad about being happy. He did miss Sofia, The time they had shared was never coming back. He realised how much he took it all for granted. As he stood in the shop he started getting tear eyed. Alone, in a dark supermarket store without heating. He was standing there alone, crying with a dark plastic bag full of frozen food and tubes of carbon dioxide.

The mountain had huge hangar door hidden in them. They were wide opened, There were at least forty snow troopers on snow mobiles that came through the hangar doors. They were well equipped with weapons and gasoline. When ever there were snow plows they had to be escorted. The mountain base of operation had a vehicle outside that was generating electricity. It had long been used for military operations. Inside the mountain base there was a larger meeting. They were discussing how generate more resources. The plan they had been using hadn't been very good at creating more resources. The trade with china had created the biggest problem. The lack of cheap electrical components meant that they needed to create a new factory and secure it for production. They had problems with vigilante military groups that had raided some of their military supplies. Johanna was on the phone with the manager of laboratory in Stockholm. They had the equipment for the production but since the area had been hit by the attacks there were no one left in the region that knew how to operate the laboratory equipment. The only person still available was a very intelligent woman who had been on vacation in the more southern part of the country. Johanna would need to be able to find away to get the woman delivered to the laboratory, she would also need protection and supplies.

When stefan came back he looked at Tova with a smile on her face and she looked back at him with happiness in her eyes. Before he went in to kiss her he asked if it was okay, He knew that it was important for her that he asked before he kissed her. She thought it was very sweet. "Did you bring the carbon dioxide". "I could only find this fizzy water tubes, I'm not sure if it will work" "Of course it will, carbon is carbon." He was surprised at her creativity and problem solving skills. She took some tubes, specialized metallic tape from one of her supply rooms and other equipment. She managed to adjust the fittings of the tube to fit her purpose.

"How long will it take to finish the solution?" "It will take a year or two to produce the solution, but since we know that it is doable all we need to do is stay alive long enough to finish it" "You know, When I look at you work I really see how amazing you are" She blushed. "You're just saying that to be nice" "What does it matter why I'm saying it. I'm saying it because I want you to know that you matter to me, otherwise I wouldn't be saying it" "As long as you mean it" "I think If you make those you care about feel like they matter that is the same thing as actually caring about them, imagine if I would say the opposite, but didn't mean it. You would still feel bad, so why does my intent matter" "I think it's manipulative" "I would agree if it was because I wanted something from it, but since the only thing I want is for you to feel good about yourself, Do you really think that's manipulative? I think a lot of people don't know how to treat each other", "You have thought about this a lot haven't you?" "Yes I have, When I was a teenager I was so angry and when I became older I had a time where I was so angry towards everyone but after a while I learned the secrets to how I should honestly behave, and especially towards women. Don't get me wrong I wasn't super bad or anything I just wasn't very good at it. I asked a psychologist what I was doing wrong and she explained to me all the things I was doing wrong, it actually really helped" "You went the scientific route, that's actually very clever" "I was surprised at how just thinking about how treating people would actually open up new doors for me, I wasn't expecting that the world

The birch people

would get over run by murderous killer birch people but during the normal time I think I actually did pretty good.” She actually started liking him more for his honesty. They looked into each others eyes and they kissed. Their kissing went from being shy to intense. They were interrupted by the birch child that fell from a counter as it was searching through the cupboard where Tova stored her mulch. It was interesting being in the presence of the child. Stefan and Tova could observe that it was displaying a range of human like behaviour and just as they started relating to the creature they would be shocked at how the creatures behaviour would not follow human behaviour. The creature would at times make noises that seemed communicative. Most time they could figure out what the creature was trying to communicate and other times the creature was a complete mystery. It was almost as if the creature was connected to something.

Malin was tending to her garden. She wore a pink hijab. Her figure was stunning and her dress was a subtle tribute to what the female form could accomplish. The garden had many colours with almost every range of salad, potato and fruit. The use of ultra efficient lighting and complex tube system that managed to make indoor gardening a lot more efficient. Malin preferred to tend to the garden herself. Tending her plants gave her a calm which nothing else could accomplish. There was nothing more interesting as a seed that would sprout, in a way it was the most basic form of life. She had once made life. The last words Uno had said to her had rooted it's way deep in her mind. A child murderer. Her mind was in conflict as to how she felt. She tried telling herself that what she did wasn't her fault. The birch trees made her do it. But at the same time she knew it was something that she had to keep secret. There was a part of her that felt happy, she was free and a leader. Whenever she would feel a moment of calm the guilt would creep it's way back.

A guard entered the garden with a sheet of paper and pen. He was wearing a blue shirt and it was easy to tell that he had a position where he was a person who took himself very seriously. “The last supply run resulted in a minor conflict with one of the smaller hoards. We lost a few men but we managed to secure more weapons and ammunition” “That's great news.” “No it isn't we are losing personnel faster than we are gaining supplies, We need to focus on supplying without going on these expensive missions” “I know, that will be all” She considered the critique she had received from the guard. She was used to men trying to tell what she needed to. It didn't matter what she was doing or how she was doing it if there was one thing she was used to it was men telling her what she needed to do. It was of course almost always wrong. It was easier just agreeing with them and letting it run out in the sand.

The city fire had been growing bigger. The supply of gas and oil was running out so they had to use animal fats to make the fire last longer. The lack of oil and gas had meant that they had to turn to electric alternatives.

She felt proud. This was the new beginning. She stood out where Uno had stood when he did his speech. She looked out at her people. They were productive, tending their supply run, stocking inventory. There was a need for everyone. The coming winter would prove to become a problem and the lack of medicine meant that there were a lot of people that were going to get sick. There had to be a change and she knew it. A change in strategy. She was in charge of Unos legacy, tending it would be the least she could do after being forced to take over his reign. There were no news of the birch child. They had managed to put down the rumors by spreading the news that it was all fake and that it was just a smaller birch tree.

The mountain base had Johanna and Tony busy with asserting their resources. Johanna had asked a general for assistance and they would be able to fly the woman from the southern

The birch people

part to Stockholm to maintain the lab. Johanna was impressed that the general would give her such assistance. Tony had made sure to spread the rumour that they had found a potential way to revert the infected birch creatures which made the chiefs and operational managers switch their focus enough to atleast divert some resources to the creation of the solution. The force at which the Infected birch people would appear from no where would still be an unexplained occurrence. There were those who had ideas. Some more educated than others.

In the deepest part of Siberia the woods would extend far out in the vast emptiness of a white and green desert made of trees. Their bark colouring them of hue of light brown with hints of white. The rocks were where covered with layers of snow. The ground was shaking. There was a force resonating through the trees and rocks. The force was crushing the ground with a malicious intent. The presence was alive. It had thoughts, ideas and beliefs. There was no trace of where the force had come and there were no one alive to bear witness of its immense and all powerful strength.

The power was not new nor was it old. It had always been there in the depths of nowhere burning and digging its way into the depths of the earth. The ground was shaking. The rocks were shaking. The trees were shaking. A hole was being etched out from the earth larger than a city of unmeasurable proportions. The locals knew not to go there. They had always know for generations they knew to avoid the powers which were digging their way into the earth. Poisoning the world. The force was not good. The force was not evil. The force had always been there yet it has never been there. Segment of ground was floating and other parts were sinking. The force had it's reason for being there and every culture had encountered it throughout the history of man kind. Where it was made and why it was there would be impossible for anyone to answer.

The most powerful and successful leaders all over the world knew of its power but kept it hidden. There was no bomb big enough or reward sweet enough for the all powerful being to be reasoned with. This was not magic nor was it imagination. The force was a living thing that had stretched it's invisible threads and arms all over the earth. Those who had tried reasoned with it in it's many forms have not succeeded. Powerful warriors, politicians and leaders. They were nothing. The power immanating was living, thinking and breathing. There were historical figures that speculated that the force had come from the gods themselves whilst other had thought it was a reward. A way for all of mankind to prove its worth in the cosmos. There were those that tried to destroy it and there were those who tried to become it. Mislead by it and deceived. This force was an insult to time and made a mockery of the nothingness that filled the cosmos. The force was not evil or good. It was strong.

There were those at the mountainbase operation that knew about it and did not dare speak of it. They did not believe in hope and the reason why is because they knew that the force could not be reasoned with and it could not be defeated. The only thing it could be was ignored and accepted. There were some that did not agree but they would just like everything else in this world rot away and disappear like a gust of air, never to be recreated yet constatly mimiced. A faint which all would meet. The all and powerful force is what lies deeply rooted at the core of your being. It becomes the lack of ethics in the universe and sucks the good and the bad out from the world.

Despite the force being all powerful and omnipotent it was only imortal in the traditional sense. It could not age. It could not be blown to pieces but it was very much real and very much created by something for some purpose. The force is what the world has always been

The birch people

and will always be. There were those with ideas that would kill the force. in the midst of the Siberian deepest forest there were a massive hoard of infected birch people. The hoard was growing.